

Families' Experiences of Adopting from Overseas

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Abstract

Research into intercountry adoption in the UK is limited in range and scope in comparison to the growing body of findings from the US, Scandinavia and the Netherlands and this thesis will provide the first in-depth study of the views and experiences of parents who have adopted children from overseas since the IBA Report in 1991. It will provide empirical research findings that can be used, both at a national and a local level, to aid policy decision-making.

Foreign-born children represent only a small minority of children in the UK but the number and proportion of children adopted from overseas is growing and seems likely to remain substantial in years ahead and there is a need to understand more fully the experiences of families who adopt these children. Because intercountry adoption has been on a small scale in the UK, services available have been fragmentary and diverse around the country and the expertise and support available to parents both during and after the adoption has differed greatly. However, with the passing of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the ratification of the Hague Convention in 2003, Local Authorities are now required to provide the same level of services to intercountry adopters and a major programme of training is currently being launched.

This thesis will examine parents' experiences of the adoption process and the ways in which they deal with the challenge of recognising the child's birth culture and issues of race and ethnicity, and will also look at who they turn to for support both during and after the adoption of their children. A total of thirty-one families who between them had adopted forty-three children (twenty nine girls and fourteen boys) from twelve different countries were interviewed about their experiences. The families lived in a number of different locations scattered around the UK, from the south coast of England to the North East of England but with the biggest number (fourteen) living in London.

It was evident that experiences differed considerably influenced by a number of factors including the age of the children, the country from which they were adopted and the neighbourhood in which families lived. The findings suggest that preparation of parents for adopting children from overseas has in the past been neglected in a number of ways and recommends the need for a more comprehensive range of specialist services both pre and post adoption.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Aims and Objectives

Setting the scene

This chapter will outline reasons why there has been a need to study the experiences of parents' adopting from overseas and will indicate how the research questions, on which this study has been based, have developed from earlier studies of intercountry adoption. Also, an indication will be given about the motivations for wanting to do research on the topic of intercountry adoption and lastly there will be an outline to the structure of the thesis.

Adoptions based on arrangements, where children leave the country they have been living in order to be placed with a family (for adoption) in another country are intercountry adoptions.¹ However, a number of alternative terms are currently being used including 'international adoption', 'transnational adoption' (Rygvoid et al 1999)² and more simply 'overseas adoption'. The preferred terms used throughout the thesis are intercountry adoption and overseas adoption which will be used interchangeably.

Serious issues have been raised about intercountry adoption not only about the additional tasks for prospective adoptive parents and children who may be adopted from overseas, but for policy makers and the community in which the children will be expected to become a part. Those who oppose the practice are concerned on a number of issues including concerns about the 'trade' in babies who are illegally obtained for profit from mothers who are either tricked or pressured into giving up their babies (Ngabonziza 1991) and Triseliotis (2000a) asks the question of whether intercountry adoption as practised today is a 'global trade or a global gift?' Other worries are that it diverts

¹ Intercountry adoption of children by relatives is quite common in the UK but this will not be the focus of this research.

² Terms used by different speakers at the International Conference at Lysebu, Oslo, Norway in 1999.

resources away from services to help children in the UK (Humphrey and Humphrey 1993, Meanwell 2000) and others are disturbed about the impact on the children involved in overseas adoption (Hjern et al 2004, Hubinette 2002, Verhulst 2000). These concerns are based around issues about the role of culture and ethnicity in the development of the children's identity formation and finally, there are arguments about power relations between the poorer third world countries and the richer countries into which the children are being adopted (Saclier 2000, Kirton 2000a, 2000b, Dalen and Saetersdal 2000). However, there are others who believe that the 'benefits of intercountry adoption far outweigh any negatives' (Bartholet 1993b) and writers who believe that the need for overseas and transracially adopted children to develop a strong ethnic identity has been over emphasised (Hayes, 1993, 1995, 2000; Macey 1995).

The topic of intercountry adoption is therefore, complex and contested and with little research from the UK, it is an ideal subject for research. The decision to make this the focus of the research was influenced by a number of factors coming together but mostly it has to do with my long-standing professional interest in the field of adoption as a researcher, which has been the spur. Even after a number of years the topic has continued to fascinate but other factors attracted my interest in the direction of intercountry adoption.

My first research experience about adoption was gathering information on the views of non-relinquishing birth parents who had contested the adoption of their children. A counselling service was being offered by the Parents Without Children project to help non-relinquishing birth parents come to terms with losing their children (Mason and Selman 1997). The aims of the project were to evaluate the benefits of these services from the consumers' perspective and at the same time to find out who had been there to support the parents during the difficult times when they lost their children to adoption. This gave me experience of doing in-depth interviews, analysing data and report writing. One finding of the research was that parents had experienced great difficulty coming to terms with losing their children and that there had often been nobody they could turn to

for support. But, more importantly, they had developed an inherent mistrust of any services offered by the Local Authority Social Services Department and any social workers. They had felt betrayed at the time and had continued to have no confidence in statutory service providers. As a researcher I was also made aware of the importance of seeing issues from different perspectives. Parents who lose their children to the care system are portrayed as uncaring and 'bad' (Morgan 1998) but what was highlighted during the research was that most of the parents were not uncaring and had, in fact continued to care about their children (Charlton, et al 1999; Mason and Selman 1997). Although the parents had not been able to 'care for' their children because of difficult circumstances, they continued to 'care about' their children (Haines, Mason and Stark 1995). Similar experiences as a researcher were gained during another research project about parent's experiences of adopting children with Down's Syndrome (Mason et al 1999).

During this same period I began teaching support/lecturing on an undergraduate honours adoption module which included a section about intercountry adoption and this roused my interest in knowing more about the subject of intercountry adoption. Then came an opportunity via funding from a Newcastle University Small Grants scheme to do a postal survey of overseas adopters' experiences of the adoption process. This, along with a growing awareness about the contested nature of some aspects of intercountry adoption via teaching, an interest developed in wanting to learn more about the 'consumers' experience of adopting from overseas. More recently I have worked on two research projects in Scotland; the first a postal questionnaire about Scottish adopters' experience of the process of adopting from overseas (Selman and Mason 2003), and the second an audit of post adoption support services in Scotland available to parents adopting domestically and from overseas. Both studies have provided the opportunity for learning about policies and practices of intercountry adoption in a country other than England. The differences do not appear vast but experiences are influenced by differences in policy and practice and were sufficient to act as a timely reminder about expectations of similarity and difference between systems in different countries - even two so close and so similar in many ways.

Therefore, with a background in research and knowledge of adoption it seemed a natural progression to do my own research in the area of intercountry adoption. The original focus of the current research was to be the post-adoption experiences of parents adopting from overseas but during the interviews it became clear that for the majority of parents memories about their experiences of the process itself were still of central importance to them. It therefore seemed that to fully understand post-adoption experiences it would be necessary to know what it had been like for parents going through the process. Also, there was no other research in the UK which included both pre and post adoption experiences. However, even whilst making the decision to extend the remit of the research to incorporate the process of adoption, interest continued with the original topic of post-adoption experiences.

Although foreign-born children represent only a small minority of adopted children in the UK, the number and proportion of overseas adoption has been growing and seems likely to continue to grow or at least to remain at the level it is today. Accurate figures of how many children from overseas are adopted in Britain each year are not available, but the Department of Health estimates at least 500 children coming into the UK with entry clearance between 1980 and 1990 and possibly up to 1,000 entering unofficially. In the early 1990s several hundred children entered the UK from Romania, increasing the overall numbers of overseas adoption and more recently there has been a growth in the number of children adopted from China (Brennan 2000). Stories of the failure of such adoptions have featured sporadically in the press in recent years but there has been little research evidence to indicate the extent of such claims or of the support needs of these children and their families after adoption (Selman and Wells, 1996).

Research and intercountry adoption (ICA)

There has been much interest in how children adopted from overseas have fared in their new homes and new countries and therefore, today there is a sizeable body of research

evidence on the outcomes of ICA. However, much of the research evidence on intercountry adoption comes from the United States, Scandinavia and Holland where such adoptions are far more common than in Britain. This growing body of research on the experience of foreign-born children adopted in mainland Europe (Cederblad, 1982, 1994; Dalen and Saetersdal, 1987; Hoksbergen, et al 1987; Geerars and Hoksbergen 1996; Rorbech, 1990; Zaar, 1991, Verhulst 2000) suggests a range of difficulties, especially in the area of identity formation. However, Triseliotis (1991, p.46) has rightly warned against the “dangers involved in extrapolating and transferring research findings from one country to another”.

Unfortunately, to date, there has been very little British literature on the subject of ICA but one major British study shows that specific groups such as the Hong Kong girls who were adopted in the 1960s had shown excellent adjustment (Bagley 1993)³. However, the Department of Health is currently funding a longitudinal study of adoptees from Romania. The study involves 166 children from Romania adopted into UK families before the age of 42 months. They are being compared with a sample of 52 children adopted within the UK. About half of the Romanian children were substantially below expected developmental levels for children of their age. Findings to date are very positive and suggest that there has been a spectacular catch-up in all developmental levels (Rutter 1998, 2000; Beckett et al 2002).⁴

However, there has been even less research about the parent’s experiences other than the 1991 International Bar Association study (Mostyn and Bennett 1991). Where this research was almost entirely about the process of adoption my study is aimed at increasing our knowledge of both pre and post adoption experiences of the parents and will systematically and carefully gathers information on a number of issues concerned with identity formation. This will include investigating how parents talk to their children

³ There is a possibility that BAAF will conduct a follow-up study of these adoptions.

⁴ Some of the children have difficulties that may last for years.

about being adopted; their birth family and country of origin; whether they incorporate aspects of their children's birth culture into their everyday lives and whether they have experienced prejudice and discrimination.

The study

The study reported on in this thesis involved in-depth interviews with thirty-one families who between them had adopted forty-three children (twenty-nine girls and fourteen boys) from twelve different countries. The families lived in a number of different geographical locations around the UK, from the south coast of England to the North East of England but the biggest number (fourteen) lived in London.

The main aims of the research include the gathering of information from adoptive parents about their experiences of the adoption process and about ways in which parents address issues related to their children's identity development incorporating information about their biography and their heritage. A further objective is to identify post adoption needs and examine factors influencing access to and use of both formal and informal support systems. The intention is to provide empirical research findings, which will compliment the research into intercountry adoption in Europe and the current UK research on families who have adopted from Romania.

The research questions to be addressed in the thesis include the following:

- * in what ways have parents experienced the adoption process?
- * in what ways do parents tell their children about their biological heritage and teach them about their ethnic and cultural heritage?
- * how do parents prepare their children for racist incidents they may encounter?
- * who do parents turn to for support or alternatively what support do parents feel would enhance experiences of adopting from overseas?

*** how does policy and practice influence parents' experiences of adopting from overseas?**

Thesis outline

The overall aim of the thesis is to raise a wide range of issues about policy and practice related to intercountry adoption as experienced by the adoptive parents. This will begin by outlining the methods used to gather information and data used throughout the thesis and will include a discussion about why this has been the most appropriate way to do the research. In part two there will be an examination of intercountry adoption in the UK beginning by giving a brief history of ICA, including an outline of legislation development. The aim of Chapter 3 is to enable the reader to gain an understanding about the context within which the adoptions in the study were taking place. During the time of these adoptions there were even fewer adoptions than there are today and with very little formal support or information about the correct procedures families were reliant upon informal links with other adopters to find out how they were to proceed with the adoption - a situation which left parents feeling uncertain about whether the adoptions would ever be completed and whether the way the adoptions were being handled was in fact legal. Chapter 4 outlines some of these issues in more detail with a number of examples of problems faced by prospective adopters. The following Chapters (5-7) will begin the examination of post-adoption issues beginning with a look at ways in which parents tell their children about their origins. For many intercountry adoptees information about their biographical and cultural heritage will not be readily available and how much parents are able to tell them will differ considerably. For children adopted from China who have been abandoned, details about their personal history will be lacking. There will be no information about either of their parents or about their pre-natal history and very few will have been given a name by their birth mothers. However, parents adopting from other countries may have met their children's birth mothers in a court-room setting where they may or may not have been given an opportunity to speak with them; other parents may have met the birth mothers before the birth of their babies and will therefore know a good deal of personal detail which they will be able to pass to their children. However, this does not mean that all information gleaned by the adoptive

parents has been passed onto the children. There may be some facts which they feel the children either do not need to know or which the parents prefer not to tell them until they are older.

All adoptive parents of babies⁵ and young children have decisions to make about how much information they want to share with them about their birth families. Parents who have adopted from overseas also have decisions about how much they feel their children need to know about their birth country - as part of building an ethnic or cultural identity based on information and knowledge about their country of origin. The role of the child's birth country in the everyday lives of the families and the importance given to the culture of this country will be the focus of Chapter 8. The chapter will examine ways in which families see the adoption of a child from overseas as an opportunity to embrace the culture of the child's birth country and to expand their experiences beyond those of their own culture. The focus of Chapter 9 will be to investigate family's experience of racism and see whether parents have any well thought-out strategy for managing such situations and in what way they have prepared their children.

Chapter 10 looks at the issue of support (or lack of support) for the parents both before and after the adoption, with particular reference to the role of parent support groups and concludes with a consideration of the future role of such groups as 'mediating agencies' in the future.

In the final chapter (11) the researcher will review the empirical findings from the study (Chapters 4-10) and highlight those which have a particular message for policy-makers and those charged with implementing new provisions for children adopted from abroad. Recommendations for improvements in the process of intercountry adoption policy, process and practice will be made in the light of the 2002 Adoption and Children Act and

⁵ Many domestic adoptions today in the UK are of older children who will know about their birth families, but, in the past, when the majority of adoptions were of babies, similar decisions had to be made.

the new regulations covering intercountry adoption. Questions will be raised about whether the needs expressed by the parents will be met by the new provisions and what is needed to ensure that they are. Finally there will be a brief look at the limitations of the study and identify possible areas for future research on overseas adopters and their children.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Method

2.1 Introduction

This chapter has several aims including a discussion of the methodological strengths and limitations of the research project, and a justification of the methods used. There will also be a detailed account of how the research progressed; how the sample was accessed, and information about the sample population, sample size, numbers of children adopted, and countries from which the children were adopted. Finally, there will be discussion about lessons learned during the research process including recommendations of how things could have been done differently if a similar project was to be undertaken in the future.

The chapter includes a discussion of methodology outlining the advantages and disadvantages of using the chosen research method i.e. in-depth interviews. Included in the topics for discussion will be a consideration of ethical issues that can arise during research, the role of the interviewer and ways in which the interviewer and applied interview techniques can influence the responses of the interviewee and interview situation and finally concerns about interpretation of data. It was decided that the format of the interview would involve the interviewer introducing a range of topics relevant to intercountry adoption but interviewees would be encouraged to raise topics or issues that they felt were important to them. Interviews began by asking respondents to talk about their experiences of the adoption process and then moved onto their experiences since the child had come to live with them as part of their family.

In the data collection section (2.4) details are given about how the sample was accessed, which family members were present during the interview and a description of basic

family characteristics. This section will also report the process taken for analysing the collected data (2.4.3).

2.2 In Search of Knowledge: Issues of Methodology

All social research is a search for knowledge but there are many different belief systems about the nature of this knowledge and how we know the world and understand the nature of 'reality' via the generation of knowledge e.g. epistemology. Differences in epistemological beliefs will influence the choice of research method but as Harding (1987) suggests methods, methodology and epistemology are intertwined and it is often difficult to separate and discuss one without the other. We have 'methods' which are the techniques used to gather evidence; 'methodology' as the theory and analysis of how research should proceed and, as above, 'epistemology' which not only specifies what 'knowledge' is and how it is legitimated but also '...who are the 'knowers' and by what means someone becomes one' (Stanley and Wise 1993 p.188). Although methodology and epistemology both affect methods, it is important to recognise their distinction from methods.

The position taken in this research is that the views, understanding, interpretations and experiences of individuals are meaningful properties of social reality (Mason 1996 p39) and this is what this research is designed to investigate - parents' experiences of having adopted one or more children from overseas. Accepting that all research that aims to explain social phenomena will choose methods that strive for internal consistency, comprehensiveness and conceptual clarity, this section will outline and discuss the ideology underpinning why the methods used in the research are considered to achieve these aims.

It is clear that research of any form is a search for knowledge. However, one major philosophical issue concerns 'whose' knowledge is being referred to. There is a wide

literature outlining the debates surrounding the advantages or disadvantages of either using qualitative or quantitative research methods (Bryman 1993) and there have been many critics of the positivistic research paradigm, with feminist theorists playing a key role in criticising the production of and use of 'scientific' knowledge as the only legitimate form of knowledge (Stanley and Wise 1993). A key critique is a philosophical one, describing a general rejection of positivism, and the claims made for neutrality of scientific discovery as a protection against the contaminating effect of 'subjectivity' (Jayaratne and Stewart 1991). Other criticisms state that many research findings are used to support sexist and elitist values, paying little attention to the exploitative relationship between the researchers and the researched. In the following sections I will develop the reasoning behind the use of a qualitative research methodology in preference to a quantifiable and positivistic method.

Fairclough (1994) writing about the relationships between interviewer and interviewees sees the interviewer as firmly in control of the way the interview develops and of the respondents' contributions to it. This is partly because power in discourse is to do with powerful participants controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants. This is done by different methods. One is the content of what is said between people is a major way of controlling any situation and therefore, in an interview situation where there is an interview schedule the interviewer is immediately advantaged. A second way concerns the social relationship between the people involved in the discourse. In an interview situation the interviewer generally has the right to give orders and ask questions, whereas the interviewees have only the obligation to comply and answer. However, this can be countered to some extent when the interview takes place in the home of the interviewee and the interviewer then becomes a guest in the interviewees home.

Part of the criteria for achieving an 'equalising' of relationships is to allow people to 'talk back' and to give a voice to those who, in the past have been silenced. It is often felt that much sociological research is done in situations where there are significant power

differentials and these are exacerbated in many interview situations where, as mentioned above, the interviewer is perceived as the 'knower'. However, in this particular research project this produces a paradox because the vast majority of families are middle class, have had to 'fight' their way through a system which at times must have seemed stacked against them. Therefore, it is apparent they are both intelligent and determined, neither of which would normally be suggested as typical of people who need to be 'allowed' to talk back; or 'given a voice'. The adopters have had to make themselves heard and have had to 'manage' a system which has involved many layers of bureaucracy. However, there is no general agreement about the merits of intercountry adoption and whether it is truly in 'the best interests of the child' and whether what these parents have done is a good or a bad thing. Possibly because of this, families may have been inhibited in telling their story for fear of being judged and in some way being found wanting. During the interviews it became clear that many respondents had told their stories on several occasions but this had usually only been to people they knew held positive opinions about intercountry adoption or to people who had actively supported their decision to adopt from overseas.

The aim was to make sure the interviewer does not dominate the interview, allows the respondents to talk about issues that relate to themselves as they see the situation with the expectation that complete neutrality is impossible. The researcher would not advocate the necessity of actually becoming friends with respondents or to consider the research project as collaboration between researchers and researched. However, neutrality and indifference towards respondents can be replaced by 'conscious partiality', which can be achieved through a partial identification with research respondents (Mies 1983). By aiming for 'conscious partiality' it could be claimed that greater levels of rapport with respondents could be achieved with improved quality of information resulting from mutual disclosure.

However, researchers need to be aware about levels of emotional intimacy and there is a need to make sure there is no over identification with interviewees because this may

obscure certain details of the interview situation. It is also important interviewers are, at all times, aware of their own emotions and reactions during the interview – intent and rapport are the key to successful interviewing.

It has been argued that researchers should acknowledge their own interests and, if necessary, how they may differ from participants' interests i.e. interviewers need to invest part of their own personal identity in the relationship (Oakley, 1981). Therefore, the researcher mentioned their own experiences and interests in adoption and intercountry adoption in particular. These attempts at 'self-disclosure' (Edwards 1993) were used to promote a sense of mutual respect or interest between researcher and respondent. The researcher 'set out to convey to the people whose co-operation I was seeking the fact that I did not intend to exploit them or the information they gave me' (Oakley, 1981 p47).

2.2.1 Why interviews

There are a variety of research techniques available to social scientists including observation, interviewing, participant observation, use of telephone and other types of surveys, focus groups etc. The choice of data collection is in large part shaped by the nature of the research question and in this particular case by practical considerations like time, cost, manageability etc.

In-depth interviews were chosen as a research method because they are a good way of gaining access to experiences of the lived world of respondents when attempting to understand the world from the subjects' points of view (Kvale 1996) - in this case the adopters. A major aim of qualitative research methods is to give a 'voice' to the participants and a number of alternative methods of data collection have in the past been used successfully in different intercountry adoption research studies. However, many of the earlier overseas adoption research has been more quantitative in nature, including Hoksbergen et al (1987) about the outcome of adoptions from Thailand; in the UK the International Bar Association Report (Mostyn and Bennett 1991) about parents

experiences of the adoption process and more recently the Romanian research being undertaken by Michael Rutter and the English and Romanian Adoptees Study Team (Rutter et al 1998, 2000, Groothues et al 1998/9, Beckett et al 1998). The results from such research do not 'give a voice' to the researched in the same way that qualitative research can. Humphrey and Humphrey (1993) and von Melen (1998), each in a different way have given a 'voice' to adopters and adoptees. Humphrey and Humphrey give a voice to adopters with unedited accounts of their experiences of the adoption process written in their own words i.e. an adoption narrative. von Melen's study gave an 'edited voice' to intercountry adoptees by using her own words to describe the adoptees experience of adoption. Therefore, the telling of the adoption story can be written from many different perspectives and in many different styles.

It is by using an in-depth interviewing technique for this research it was hoped to gain 'an authentic insight into people's experiences' (Silverman 1993). Interviews bring with them a flexibility and versatility which enables the interviewer to listen and explore specific topics or issues as they are raised. The less structure imposed onto the interview situation the greater the possibility there is to produce interactive conditions that encourage participants to tell their stories fully. In-depth interviews provide:

'...the opportunity for the researcher to probe deeply, to uncover new clues, to open up new dimensions of a problem and to secure, vivid, accurate, inclusive accounts that are based on personal experience'. (Walker 1985 p4)

However, whilst trying to create this empathetic type of situation, where respondents take greater levels of control, there may become the problem of over-empathising with respondents and being too ready to accept what they have to say. It needs also, to be recognised that interviewees have considerable potential for sabotaging the attempt to research them. A balance has to be achieved where interviewees are put at their ease but where the interviewer is able to gather information relevant to the research topic. Therefore, interpersonal skills are important for putting respondents at their ease via introductory chats; trying to encourage respondents to be as open and as frank with the

researcher as possible; hoping they become spontaneously involved rather than meagre and easily distracted. Sometimes these aims fail as in the case of one of the families adopting from Sri Lanka (10) where, however much the mother was encouraged to talk in more detail about her adoption experiences the majority of the four hours in her home entailed a trawl through old photograph albums, filled with photographs of trips to Sri Lanka. The father seemed keen to engage in discussions about their experiences but was continually interrupted by the wife who seemed intent on looking at photographs.

It has been suggested that an open ended/in-depth interview is a 'conversation'. Unfortunately, however much one may try to make an interview into a 'conversation' this will never be fully achieved because an interview 'conversation' will have a structure and a purpose like most other types of conversations. It goes beyond what would be a spontaneous exchange of views as in an everyday conversation (Kvale 1996). Also, this conversation does not take place between equals, whatever efforts may be made to counter status differentials, the interviewer is generally more in control of the situation because they have been the one who has introduced the topic for discussion. However, open ended interviewing situations have the advantage that respondents can and are encouraged to spend time talking in detail about the issues which they feel are important to them and are not straight-jacketed into answering one question after another within a dedicated time-frame. As illustrated in the example above, it is not always possible to 'make' interviewees talk about the introduced topic and there will be occasions when it has to be accepted that some respondents have their own agenda that they are determined to maintain.

2.2.2 Use of narratives

The justification for using a narrative form of interviewing is the notion that everyone has a story to tell about their life and their experiences and most people are eager to tell their stories. Added to this, narratives are experiences that allow the storyteller to make sense of their experiences during both the construction and the telling of the story (Josselson

1996). It is with the telling and re-telling of the adoption story that families 'script' a coherent understanding of their life experiences.

In an open interview situation where there is not one question after another being put to the respondent people will take the opportunity to tell stories, narratives, about their lives (Kvale 1996). This point is reinforced by Chase (1995) who argues that 'in-depth interviews should become occasions in which we ask for life stories, suggesting that in this type of situation interviewees will tell stories about their experiences whether we encourage them to or not. Therefore, it was decided at the outset that parents would be 'invited' to tell their stories, in their own words allowing the main choice of topic/issues to match what each interviewee felt was most relevant to their experiences. It was not their whole life story that was wanted but the part related to their adoption experience.

A major advantage of using this style of interviewing technique is that during the telling of their story, the narrator (parent) takes responsibility for making sense of the story and, at the same time is empowered by being in control of what is told. By allowing the parents the opportunity to retell their stories the interviewer enables them to make sense of their experiences. The interview then becomes rewarding for both the interviewer and the interviewee.

Not only does the use of a narrative form of interviewing allow the interviewer to gain a better understanding of respondents' experiences but also respondents themselves, during the process of constructing a personal narrative, begin to see themselves as in control of their lives. This is important because narratives are not records of facts but are meaning-making systems that make sense out of the chaotic mass of experiences of life. Narratives are the means by which we shape our understandings and make sense of them and this may be in part, parent's motivation to take part in the research – it gives them the opportunity to rehearse and retell 'their narrative', their story of their adoption experience.

It could be suggested that one reason respondents agree to take part in research projects is to create a meaning about their lives through the telling of their 'stories'. Collins (1998) has argued that this may very much be the case for people suffering what he describes as 'disrupted lives', because these narratives construct a measure of coherence. To make sense of their lives individuals tell their story, via the narrative, and this also enables them to present a consistent picture of themselves to others. Triseliotis (2000) suggests for those involved in adoption, the fragmented nature of normal life is multiplied considerably and it could therefore be argued that having an opportunity to tell their adoption story will help them to make sense of this fragmentation. Treacher and Katz (2001) agree with this argument and they believe narratives pervade the whole of family life and not only influence how people think about themselves but how they think of others.

A final point to make about using a narrative style of interviewing is that it has to be accepted that the interview or the 'story' will be only partial because interviews cannot go on indefinitely. Therefore a major limitation of any research project is that they are time-limited. All projects, such as this would be enhanced by repeat visits to the respondents or a triangulation of methods to improve claims of validity. In another research project it would be interesting to follow-up a number of the issues raised and follow the families' experiences as the children get older and especially as they reach adolescence and then move into adulthood. However, I do not think that these limitations detract from the validity of research using methods and research techniques used in this particular project.

2.2.3 The researcher and the researched

As outlined earlier in the discussion there was a preference at all times during the interviews for a personal involvement of the researcher with respondents in the belief that:

“..the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interview is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship” (Oakley, 1981 p41)

However, Cotterill (1992) argues that such approaches (i.e. non-hierarchical, reciprocal and engaged) can be questioned because she found that many respondents said they found it easier to confide in a friendly stranger rather than a friend. There are many debates about how interviews should be conducted but in this instance it was decided to adopt a friendly relaxed approach in the time available.

It was, therefore, apparent for a need to construct a positive relationship with respondents and this had to be done within a very short space of time because within minutes of arriving at someone's house the researcher is hoping to embark on a 'conversation' about a topic of their choosing – the parents adoption experiences. This is not quite as daunting as it may at first seem because twenty of the families had previously completed a postal questionnaire as part of an earlier research project (Mason 1999) in which they had indicated their willingness to be interviewed at a later date. However, this does not necessarily mean good relationships between interviewer and interviewees will ensue - interviews are structured by both interviewer and interviewee and are a shared event with contributions from both parties.

Both the interviewer and the interviewee are aware of the image being projected, and each will only be presenting a partial version of themselves on the basis of what they perceive as being wanted/needed. The extent to which a respondent may present a partial version of himself or herself is also linked to the relevance of the research to the respondent and the extent to which they feel exploited by the researcher. This is one of the main reasons why an open, but in-depth interview was chosen because it provides time for researchers to establish trust with respondents, as Jones (1985 p.51) puts it, ‘.....to convince others that we want to hear what they have to say, take seriously, and are

indeed hearing them'. Nevertheless, we must have in mind at all times that however much we might try to influence them it is impossible to control the attitudes of others. We are, therefore, unable to fully control opinions interviewees will have of us – how they evaluate us, judge us and value the research.

One aspect of being accepted by others is the issue of being a member of the social group under study – acceptance versus over familiarity with – we either may not know enough about the issues under investigation/study or we may be over familiar with them, and in both cases it can be problematic. Shared life experiences can be advantageous but if the researcher has not experienced the subject under investigation this need not work to their disadvantage. Allowing respondents to be the teachers and the researcher to be an enthusiastic learner can work well. Having a genuine interest, as mentioned earlier, in what is being said and a willingness to listen to what respondents have to say can encourage people to warm to the researcher and open up to researchers – they are the experts.

It was hoped that synthesis of narrative theory and good relationships with the respondents could be achieved where the adoption story came from the interviewee but at the same time the interviewer was not be a passive bystander. This would be achieved if the interviewer was prepared to give something of themselves to the situation; to be open about their interests and past experiences hopefully making the interviewee feel comfortable and encouraged to be equally open and frank about their experiences.

2.2.4 Interview analysis

The aim of research analysis is to try to uncover how respondents understand and make sense of their lives and how they create meaning about their families and the adoption of their children. An analysis of interview transcriptions is an interpretation, a making sense of what has been said with the hope of evaluating and conveying the true meanings about the experiences of respondents - done in a sympathetic and accurate fashion. Silverman

(1993), however, cautions researchers against the impulse to equate ‘experience’ (as reported by the interviewee) with ‘authenticity’. He claims that today’s society is very much an ‘interview society’ where via talk show exposures individuals are used to a confessional mode of speaking about their intimate experiences. This is especially so with adoptive parents who, via their experiences of having a Home Study Assessment done by social workers⁶, are used to considering what are appropriate answers in different situations and to different audiences.

A major consideration when carrying out analysis and interpretation of research findings is that of subjectivity because each person’s sense making will be different and dependent on their own set of experiences. The lack of standardization implies inevitable concerns about reliability – biases are difficult to rule out. It has been suggested that it is now acceptable that part of the researcher will impinge into the research and we must not consider this a burden which hinders interpretation (Cohen 2000). What has to happen is that by taking responsibility for interpretation we also take on the authority as an interpreter (Josselson 1996). This thesis will therefore be my interpretation of the experience of adopting children from overseas as told by the parents.

Atkinson (1990) suggests it is necessary to perform a type of ‘phenomenological reduction’ when analysing interviews i.e. trying to step back and suspend any taken-for-granted assumptions about how ‘facts’ and realities’ come to be represented as they are in the interview transcripts and any subsequent articles. It can be questioned whether it is ever possible to totally suspend taken-for granted assumptions.

Kugelberg (1995) suggests that doing research ‘at home’ in the culture of the researcher creates certain problems as well as having many benefits. The problems stem from over-

⁶ Chapter 4 has further discussion about how families ‘manage’ or present themselves during the Home Study Assessment process.

familiarity with words and signs used in everyday life. There is always the problem of assuming the researcher and the researched have the same meaning and understanding – extrapolate meanings onto the meanings of others. Questions, therefore, need to be asked as to whether studying families from the same country/culture as the researcher hinders or help the research process. Or does identifying with families, especially their love and desire for children, enhance research relationships? (Kugelberg 1995).

There is an innate tendency for researchers to be so focused on gathering data that there is a danger of not considering different ways in which the data can be analysed. Therefore, once the data collection process has been completed there is a need to select an appropriate level of analysis, which is most suitable for the type of, and purpose of the analysis.

Having taken time and spent energy trying to engage with respondents during the research process hoping to truly engage with their experiences it has been suggested by Josselson and Lieblich (1995) that at the writing stage researchers have to make themselves break away from this relationship and move onto new ones - this time with the reader.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

All research raises ethical issues but research based on in-depth interviews needs special attention in relation to participant's vulnerability and the researcher's interpretive authority. This means consideration needs to be given to issues before, during and after initial research contact. Ethical problem solving entails an initial accurate assessment of the potential for risks and sensitive issues that may be raised – recognising the vulnerability of all participants involved in the research. These can include issues about privacy and confidentiality, or respectful communication and consent. However, all ethical considerations are subjective with many ethical decisions depending very much

upon the values of the researcher (May, 1994). As Kimmel (1988) suggests, the distinction between ethical and unethical behaviour is not 'dichotomous' and decisions have to be made about the particular ethical issues surrounding each individual piece of research with an awareness of the ethical climate in society at the time of the research.

A major concern for many participants in research is that of confidentiality, therefore it is important to try to assure respondents that this will be maintained at all times. Bulmer (1982 p225) suggests that:

'.... identities, locations of individuals and places are concealed in published results, data collected are held in anonymized form, and all data kept securely confidential.' (Bulmer, 1982)

For this research respondents have been assured that names will be changed in any reporting of research findings, but at the same time there is always a problem that certain distinctive family characteristics or location may make families identifiable. This is one of the main potential costs to those taking part in research where the dissemination of material and personal information has the potential for identifying respondents. Researchers, therefore, must always be careful about how they discuss their subjects and in this particular case unique or distinctive details of the adoptions, family compositions etc. needs to be taken into consideration. During the writing up of this research families were each given a unique ID number by which they are referred. If individual's names are used at any time these are pseudonyms and not their real names. However, anonymity is not possible because of the methods of information gathering i.e. the interview – they are no longer anonymous to the researcher.

When discussing ethical issues there is a tendency to focus on the data collection point of contact rather than on the ways in which the data are to be used or the purpose for which the findings are to be used. Probing into the private sphere and delving into deeply personal experiences will call for reassurances about how the information is to be used (Lee and Renzetti 1993). It is therefore important to take into consideration dissemination

of research findings and the question of what responsibility researchers have for the knowledge they acquire. One way forward is to clearly explain to subjects the nature of the research project and the way in which the information is to be used. It was explained to all respondents that the research was being done as part of research for a PhD and many of them seemed to value the academic nature of the research project.

A further point for ethical consideration is that of objective reporting. However much a researcher becomes immersed in the subject matter there can never be certainty about their interpretations and that they equal the perceptions of the participants.

Anyone doing research with families adopting children from overseas must be aware of past media reporting about families adopting from abroad and the nature of this reporting (Daily Mail, 1995, 1996, 1997; The Mail on Sunday 1995, Cook Report 1996; The Guardian 1999). At times this has been particularly negative and has questioned the validity and legality of such adoptions. This has made families reluctant to talk about their experiences to anyone outside of their immediate circle of friends and family. Therefore, care needs to be taken not to undermine the interests of those who have agreed to take part in the research and more especially the whole population of past and future intercountry adopters. If information gathered from the research were used to discredit and challenge the validity (moral, ethical and legal) of family formation via adoption this would be an injustice to those who, in the past and possibly in the future, form families by overseas adoption. The validity and legitimacy of ICA is based upon positive research findings about outcomes of intercountry adoption and the inclusion of ICA in UK law on adoption and childcare (details of which are outlined in the following chapter about the history and legislative development of intercountry adoption in the UK). However, researchers must always be aware that during research their findings may reveal unexpected conclusions that may lead them to question the foundation upon which their beliefs about the nature of the research have been based.

As a final note on ethical considerations, before any research project begins there is a need for researchers to ask themselves whether interviews are inherently exploitative as suggested by James (1993) and if so in what ways this can be minimised - an issue which will be discussed in the later section of this chapter.

2.4 Methods: Sampling, Data Collection and Analysis

2.4.1 The sample

The sample used in this project is more opportunist/convenience than structured but there are a number of advantages of a varied sample, in that diversity can be highlighted and engaged with. Furthermore it is difficult, given the lack of accurate official statistics and the researcher not having access to information and data held by the Department of Health⁷ and the Home Office, to identify a typical or representative sample of intercountry adopters. Therefore, random sampling with the inherent advantage of eliminating bias would not have been possible or appropriate for this study. Also, with small-scale research projects such as this there is the factor of time, and cost to be taken into consideration. It proved necessary to limit the number of families interviewed and because of the geographical distribution time spent with each family was limited to one visit. When there is this type of limitation or restriction it is unlikely that a representative sample can be used, and therefore, non-probability sampling will be the preferred technique where any generalization of the results beyond the actual sample, will be stated with qualification. Therefore the sample for this study has been a combination of both convenience sampling and snowball sampling. With convenience sampling, subjects are selected because of their convenient accessibility to the researcher and this case it is via the use of the previously conducted postal questionnaire (Mason 1999). Snowball sampling allowed the researcher to go beyond the families who had been included in the earlier postal questionnaire respondents. Inevitably, with this method of

⁷ DoH has given funding and access to information on families adopting from Romania to Professor Michael Rutter and The English and Romanian Adoptees Study Team at the Institute of Psychiatry.

sampling there can be no claim for representiveness. However, the researcher has over a number of years met and spoken to many other parents who have adopted children from overseas and they raised issues similar to those discussed during the research interviews.⁸

The initial means of contact was with families who had previously completed a postal questionnaire for an earlier study by Mason (1999). When completing the postal questionnaire families had indicated a willingness to take part, at a later date, in an in-depth study and to be interviewed. A total of twenty from the final thirty-one families were accessed via this means, with all but one of the remaining eleven families being recommended by these respondents. The last remaining respondent was the sister of a colleague. In total the thirty-one families making up the sample for this research had fifty-eight children between them of whom forty-three were adopted from overseas, one child adopted from the UK, and the remaining were fourteen birth children.⁹ A unique ID will identify each family and this will be the means by which families will be discussed during the thesis (see Appendix D).

The original research project from which the majority of this sample population was taken was a postal survey undertaken during December 1996 and May 1997, of five Parents' Groups (see Table 2.4.1) involved in overseas adoption. Also invited to participate in the research were past clients of the Intercountry Adoption Social Worker Group (ICASWG). The purpose of the survey was to provide a picture of British families adopting from abroad which would update some of the information provided by the earlier, 1989, International Bar Association study (Mostyn and Bennett 1991). The findings from this project have been published (Mason 1999) and were used as the basis for the researcher's unpublished M.A. dissertation.

⁸ Met in various settings including attendance at parent group seminars organised by AFAA (Association of Families Adopting from Abroad), summer parties of the Guatemala Family Association and being a member of Network for Intercountry Adoption.

⁹ See later sections in this chapter for further details about the families and in Appendix D and E.

The method used for accessing the sample for the postal survey was by approaching a number of parents' groups asking whether members would be willing to help with the research study, in similar way that the International Bar Association project had accessed their sample (Mostyn and Bennett 1991). The overall response rate was 13 percent, with response from the sub-groups ranging from 27 percent for clients of the Intercountry Social Worker Group to only 6 per cent from members of Adopted Romanian Children. The low response rate for the adopters of Romanian children may have been because many of them were taking part in the series of research studies financed by the Department of Health and carried out by Professor Michael Rutter and the English and Romanian Adoptees (ERA) study team. Inevitably there has been a response bias in the postal survey but since the researcher was reliant on gatekeepers for access to the sample there can be no way of calculating the extent of this bias. Nevertheless the postal survey provided important data for consideration and further investigation in the current research.

Data was collected from 145 families representing families adopting from 29 different countries - the largest numbers having adopted from Guatemala (11.8%), El Salvador (11.8%), Paraguay (10.0%) and Sri Lanka (11.1%)¹⁰. A look at the Department of Health figures for all families adopting from overseas between 1993 and 1996 (Brennan 2000) suggests that the respondents may reflect families adopting from overseas more generally. It does appear that the number of respondents who have adopted from El Salvador is over-represented in the postal questionnaire sample but this may be because the DoH have no data pre 1993 and the adoptions from El Salvador took place before this date. Looking at the earlier IBA Report (Mostyn and Bennett 1991) suggests this is the case because they had similar numbers of families adopting from El Salvador (14%) as those in the Mason (1999) postal questionnaire. Also, in the IBA Report they comment that the countries in their sample are typical of the underlying trend at that time, with a

¹⁰ See Appendix A: Numbers of Children Adopted from each Country

move away from Asian to South American countries as some Asian countries were ‘closing their doors to Western adopters’ (p31).¹¹

A total of 205 children had been adopted by 139 families with a further 6 parents in the process of adopting (2 from China and 4 from Guatemala) being included in the analysis. Table 2.4.1 gives details about the response rate for each of the groups who took part in the survey.

Table 2.4.1: Postal Questionnaire: Response rates for each organisation

Organisation	Numbers Sent	Numbers Returned	Response Rate %
1. AFAA*	400	59	15
2. El Salvador Family Association	40	4	10
3. Guatemala Support Group	90	8	9
4. ICASWG*	170	46	27
5. Peru Adoptive Families Group	36	4	10
6. ARC*	400	24	6
TOTALS	1136	145	13%

*AFAA - Association for Families who have Adopted from Abroad;
ICASWG - Inter-country Adoption Social Worker Group
ARC - Adopted Romanian Children

Different methods of approach were used with each of the family groups - a summary of which is given in Appendix B. The level of funding for this postal survey did not allow for follow-up letters that would have improved the response rate. For this and reasons mentioned above the response rates were low, and there is likely to have been selection bias.

Accessing the sample

At a practical level the major problem with using respondents from the postal questionnaire was the geographical distribution of the families. By far the greatest majority of these families were living in the South of England and as the research was

¹¹ Other trends in sending countries are identified later in the chapter during discussion about the representiveness of the current research sample

based in the North East of England considerable time and costs were incurred travelling to the homes of interviewees. The decision about which families to approach and invite to take part in the research study was, in general, pragmatic and based on practical considerations. It was the feasibility of travelling to visit each family that became the most important issue. Standard letters inviting families to take part in the research were sent out in small batches to families living within travelling distance of each other offering each family a choice of three time slots a day over a period of five working days. The size of these groups differed. For families living in London it was possible to identify as many as ten families that could be reasonably accessed over a period of two or three days. For families living in other regions where there was a much wider geographical distance between each there may have been as few as four letters sent out at a time. A period of three to four weeks was allowed for responses before specific appointments were arranged by telephone. The overall response rate for families who were approached from the original postal survey was approximately fifty percent. More families living in London were invited to take part in the research but overall acceptance rates were about the same for families from different parts of the country.

However, the first interview was with one of the adopters from China who lived locally and was the sister of a colleague (01), one of the single mothers, who agreed to be interviewed after being told about the research. During the interview she suggested another single mother, who had also adopted her daughter from China, and whom she thought would also agree to be interviewed – subsequent arrangements were made with this mother (04). One particular contact from the postal questionnaire respondents living in the North East of England, who had adopted from Guatemala (07), recommended a family they knew who had adopted from both Sri Lanka and China (02) and agreed to telephone this family to ask permission for the researcher to contact them to request an interview. This contact proved to be invaluable because the family were active members of a small informal network of adopters who all had regular contact with each other. As a

result a further five families agreed to be interviewed (03, 05, 06, 08 and 09)¹² from this one contact. Four of these families had adopted from China and the remaining family had adopted from Bulgaria (08). The inclusion of families adopting from China corrected a bias of the postal survey and reflected more closely the rise in adoptions from China that began in 1995/6¹³. One of the families adopting from Sri Lanka (14) recommended two other families that they knew who had also adopted from Sri Lanka (21, 22)¹⁴. All three families were members of the Sri Lanka Adopters Group.¹⁵

The final sample of thirty-one families had adopted from twelve different countries. Table 2.4.2 shows how many families adopted from each country and the time period from which the adoption was completed. However, the time it took for each adoption to be completed varied considerably and therefore some adoptions may have started months or even years before the final dates shown. The length of the adoption process is discussed in more detail in chapter four. An examination of each time period suggests that for pre 1990 adoptions the main country from which the families were adopting were Sri Lanka and the Latin American countries. For the years 1991 – 1994 the trend was changing with most adoptions being from Romania but there were still three families who had adopted from Latin America and two adoptions from Sri Lanka. However, the biggest shift appears to be in the latest time period where there were seven families adopting from China. The trends shown in this small sample mirror those of the major receiving countries (USA, France, Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands) (Selman 2000).

For the pre 1990 adoptions each of the main sending countries in the sample group are amongst the top ten major sources of children for intercountry adoption with Brazil being the 4th most popular, Sri Lanka 5th, Chile 6th and El Salvador 10th (Selman 2000). The top three sending countries were Korea, India and Colombia. All three countries have

¹² Each of these families lived in the North East of England

¹³ See Table 4.2.1 in Chapter 4 for details of adoption applications in E & W since 1993-2000

¹⁴ Family 14 lived in Southampton, Family 22 in Derby and Family 21 in Kent

¹⁵ See Chapter 10 for more about parent support groups

been reluctant to send children to the UK because of a lack of satisfactory mediating procedures in the UK.

Table 2.4.2: Year families adopted from each country and continent

Continent	<1990	1991-1994	1995-2000	Totals
Latin America	3	3	3	9
Brazil	-	2	-	2
Chile	-	-	1	1
Ecuador	1	-	-	1
El Salvador	1	-	-	1
Guatemala	1	-	2	3
Peru	-	1	-	1
Asia	6	3	7	16
China	-	-	7	7
Philippines	-	1	-	1
Sri Lanka	6	2	-	8
Europe	0	3	2	5
Bulgaria	-	-	1	1
Romania	-	3	1	4
USA	0	0	1	1
TOTALS	9	9	13	31

The UK did not start to collect data on the number of children adopted from overseas until 1993 so no direct comparisons between this sample and UK intercountry adoptions can be made for this earliest period. A look at the UK figures for the two later periods suggests that again this small sample group is not untypical to the overall UK trend with adoptions from China dominating all intercountry adoptions, peaking in 1996 with 206 adoptions and remaining the main source of children through to the year 2000 (Brennan 2000)¹⁶. Adoptions from Guatemala have consistently remained popular since 1995 with an average of twenty-one adoptions a year (Brennan 2000). Despite the non-scientific approach to selecting a the sample for this study it can be seen that the countries from which the families have adopted are not unrepresentative of other intercountry adoptions in the UK.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Table 4.2.1 in chapter 4 for detailed figures.
¹⁷ Sri Lanka had the highest percentage (17%) of all adoptions in the early 1991 IBA Report with Brazil the second highest at 16% (Mostyn and Bennett 1991).

As the number of families agreeing to be interviewed progressed decisions had to be made about how many families should be included in the study. There were a number of family or country characteristics that were initially considered to be of interest and there was discussion about the feasibility of trying to get a sample consisting of only one or possibly two country groups. However, because geographical distribution was a major consideration this was particularly difficult. The only country that stood out as being possible to do this with was China but as these would have all been very recent adoptions the post adoption experiences would have been very limited and would have influenced greatly findings about many of the themes identified in the literature.

As access to families progressed it did become apparent that certain clusters of country groups were developing – Sri Lanka and Latin America in particular with one or two families adopting from European countries. At one point during the approaches to families to participate in the research the researcher considered trying to get equal numbers of families from each country and a limited number of countries/regions. However, time was passing and the costs were mounting so it got to point where the decision had to be made to call a halt and to use the families who had already agreed to be interviewed. The use of all interviews rather than those within predefined set of characteristics is justified on the basis that breadth of access can enhance an investigative research project. In addition the decision was made to include families who had adopted from Europe and the USA because their children were not so obviously culturally different to their adoptive parents, unlike all the other children who were of a different colour to their adoptive parents. This would give a different perspective on issues of identity which was seen as a likely theme of the research¹⁸. Therefore, on balance it was seen as advantageous to include all families in the final analysis and reporting.

¹⁸ See chapters 8 and 9 where the experiences' of families with children of the same colour to themselves is part of the discussion.

Characteristics of the families and children

This section outlines some of the main characteristics of the thirty-one families that make up the research. In all but one family when more than one child had been adopted the children were each adopted from the same country. The exception to this was the family who had adopted from Sri Lanka in 1990 and from China in 1998 (02). There were a total of five families that had birth children; four prior to the overseas adoption and one family had birth children since adopting from Peru (23). The domestic adoption was a relative adoption and it had taken place soon after the family returned from China after having adopted their daughter in 1996 (03). Table 2.4.3 shows how many children have been adopted from each country and continent.¹⁹

Table 2.4.3: Numbers of children by country and continent of origin

Continent	F	M	Total
Latin America	10	4	14
Brazil	1	2	3
Chile	1	-	1
Ecuador	2	-	2
El Salvador	1	-	1
Guatemala	5	1	6
Peru	-	1	1
Asia	17	5	22
China	8	-	8
Philippines	2	-	2
Sri Lanka	7	5	12
Europe	1	4	5
Bulgaria	-	1	1
Romania	1	3	4
USA	1	1	2
TOTALS	29	14	43

The majority of the children (65 percent) were less than one year when they were adopted with only five children adopted over the age of three years – see Table 2.4.4.²⁰

¹⁹ Appendix D: identifies each of the thirty-one families via their personal ID number and shows how many adopted children and birth children there are in each family.

²⁰ Appendix E: Individual Family Profiles gives details of how old each child was at the time of the adoption.

One of the reasons often given for adopting from overseas has been a wish to adopt a baby or young child – see chapter 4. Of those adopted over the age of two years the eldest child was a boy adopted from Romania who was eight years old when his single mother adopted him (20). However, the mother had made several visits to see him in Romania over a number of years before finally adopting him.

Table 2.4.4: Age distribution of children when adopted

Age of children:	< 1 year	1-2 years	3+ years	Total
Totals	28 children	10 children	5 children	43 children

Twenty-three percent of the adopters in the sample group were single women who had adopted from four different countries, with three having adopted from China (01, 04, 24), one from El Salvador (11), two from Romania (20,30) and one from Guatemala (31). The majority of families were from the professional classes (87%)²¹ there was one full time homemaker and the remaining head of households were either skilled or unskilled workers with no management responsibilities. The overall occupational categories of the families are similar to those in the IBA Report (Mostyn and Bennett 1991) but they differed from the IBA sample in that the earlier adopters were not as likely to be from the professional categories. The skilled and unskilled heads of households were amongst adopters from each of the three time periods in Table 2.4.2 i.e. were not only among the more recent adopters.

Further details about individual family characteristics are contained in Appendix E: Individual Family Profiles. Included in each profile are details of the marital status of the parents, age of the children at the time of the adoption and interview, the area of the country in which the family live, which family members were present during the interview and what, if any links the family has with parent support groups.

²¹ Included in this group are two vicars whose incomes were not high but their status is.

2.4.2 Data collection

Data collection took place during the Spring and Summer months of 2000. Once decisions had been made about the research technique and it had been decided that interviews were to be the preferred research tool there were still a number of other considerations to be made by the researcher. These included decisions about different aspects of the research context that might be seen as impacting on the interview and the quality and relevance of information collected.

Interview context

As discussed earlier there was concern about the way in which access to informants was gained because this was likely to affect the research relationship (Burgess, 1991) and once an interview has been agreed upon both the interviewer and the interviewee would feel under an obligation to continue. With this in mind it was clear the role of the interviewer was highly significant and would impact on the willingness of respondents to share details of their lived experiences and on the overall quality of data collection. Therefore, it was hoped that by having the interview conducted in the respondents' own home, with an informal style, the interview would feel more like an intimate conversation. In fact, not only did respondents offer hospitality by accommodating the researcher in their homes for the duration of the interview there were seven families who provided a meal and two offered overnight accommodation which was not taken up. This may also give interviewees the opportunity to feel more in control of the situation than they possibly would if they were not on their 'own territory'. By accepting that an interview is a highly complex situation and must be approached in a sensitive fashion the main aim was to encourage informants to relate to the researcher, in their own terms about their own experiences - rapport building.

Families who have adopted children have, during the Home Study Assessment stage of the adoption process²², been subjected to intensive and extensive (and often what is

²² Chapter 4 examines issues raised during the process of adopting from overseas and the families' experiences of having a Home Study Assessment is discussed

deemed intrusive) questioning by social workers about a whole range of topics including personal values and lifestyles choices. This experience might affect the parents' responses in one of two different ways. One is that adopters have become adept at telling people what they think they want to hear or alternatively, that they anticipate being interviewed as an opportunity to talk more openly about how they feel and appreciate being given the opportunity to tell their story from their perspective - telling their story in their own words rather than trying to 'second-guess' what is the right or the wrong answer. Therefore, rather than insisting on a particular order of questioning, interviews usually started off by participants being invited to talk about their experiences of the adoption process and then introducing issues that they saw as relevant to their life as a family who have adopted a child(ren) from overseas. However, an interview schedule²³ was prepared prior to meeting with the families and this acted as a 'mental prompt'. The schedule consisted of a list of the main themes of interest and was taken to each of the interviews to be used if at any point during the interview the 'conversation' about the adoption story got into difficulties and 'dried up'. One of the main aims was to encourage respondents to tell their adoption story. The plan was to have few prompts during the interview and interviewees would be tell their story in their own words in their own way – this would result in there being different emphasis being given to different parts of their own adoption story.

The interview

All the families were extremely welcoming and showed openness beyond what had been expected when talking about their experiences. Obviously by agreeing to take part in the research families were ready to be interviewed but it was the welcoming into their homes and the meeting with their families that had not been expected. The researcher was

²³ A copy of the interview schedule is in Appendix C

expecting to spend some time at least building up some sort of rapport with the families but this did not seem necessary.²⁴

The interviews lasted between one hour and four and a half hours with the average length of time being about two hours. In the case of one of the families with whom the researcher shared a meal, after the interview had finished the family agreed that the tape recorder remained turned on so that part of the mealtime interactions between all family members could be captured.

All the interview sessions were recorded in order to minimise interruptions for note taking and to assist in creating as normal a situation as possible. Tape recordings also have the advantage that the detail of what was being said during the interview is captured unlike note taking (Silverman 2001). On each occasion verbal permission to record was requested and received, once it was explained that the information would remain completely confidential, and was being used simply to dispense with note-taking. On a purely practical level the use of a tape recorder was generally unproblematic, as most respondents seemed not to notice the tape recorder during the interviews.

Family members who were present during the interview varied between interviews. This was a consequence of the method of approach to families. The letter written inviting families to participate in the research was a general invitation to take part in new research that was to look in more depth at the families' experiences of adopting from overseas and it was left up to the families to decide who wanted to take part. There was no deliberate strategy to include or exclude any particular family members. As a result some interviews involved all family members and others only one parent was present. There were five interviews when only the mother was present but a further ten interviews where the mother and children were present. In ten interviews both parents were interviewed (no children present) and two interviews with the mother and father where children were

²⁴ Written consent to be interviewed was not sought but consent was agreed verbally.

present. Finally there were four occasions when only the father was interviewed. There were no fathers present during any of the interviews with those adopting from China.²⁵ However, in the interviews where there were no husbands present during the interview each of them had been met previously at a third birthday party of one of their daughter's (03). During short conversations that took place at this party it appeared that in at least two of the cases (02, 05) it had been the husbands who had been the initial enthusiasts about the idea of adopting a child from overseas.

No restrictions were made about whether children were present during the interview or how much they contributed and therefore, as a consequence, there were differing degrees of participation between interviews. There was a total of twelve interviews (39 percent) during which the children were present and a further eleven families where the children were introduced to the researcher but they were not present during the interview. The children in the other eight families (26 percent) were never met and did not take any part in the research. Of the children who were present during the interview their involvement varied considerably. In some cases the children were little more than babies and were either asleep or playing in another part of the room, watching television or in another part of the house away from the interview context. However, there were children who sat and listened and at times commented on what was being said (11,19, 29,31). Three of the older children from two different families (20, 21) spoke at length to the interviewer about their experiences after the interview with their parents had ended. Being able to speak to some of the children provided a different perspective on what the parents were saying - for example, how much they discussed their children's birth country, how much their children understood about the culture of their birth country and other subjects pertinent to the research study.

This lack of standardisation about which children were present during the interview could be seen as a problem and the presence of children would most likely have had an impact

²⁵ These included 3 single mothers

on what was discussed. However, it was considered that getting different types of interview added to the richness of the overall data.

2.4.3 Data analysis

One of the first and most important aspects of data analysis is familiarization with the data therefore the first stage of the analysis entailed listening to each of the interviews prior to transcription. This first listening to the tapes served a dual purpose, the first was to check that the interview had in fact been recorded and secondly to make some initial notes about interesting points or unusual comments that seemed to stand out from the rest. The transcriptions that were generated from the audiotapes required a considerable investment of time and energy and in this instance it was decided that notes would not be taken of all the pauses, repairs, overlaps.

Once the tape recordings had been transcribed, read for the first time and a few notes taken, the next step was to start identifying some general themes derived from reading the literature and then add more themes and sub-themes as the analysis went along (Miles and Huberman 1984). Reading and re-reading the scripts and making annotations in the margins of the transcripts did this (Bryman 2001). The analysis continued via a systematic process of sifting of the data according to these key issues and themes²⁶ which allowed the researcher to begin to make sense of what had been talked about during the interviews (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2004). Ideally direct comparisons of themes and categories should be made between interviews but this was not possible because purposefully the interviews had been free flowing (May 1994).²⁷

²⁶ A cut-and-paste procedure was undertaken on the computer as a method of keeping identified themes/sub-themes/categories of each transcript together – record was kept about which interview each section had been taken.

²⁷ Because the aim of the research was to allow parents to focus on parts of their experiences they felt was most important to them it gave an opportunity for issues to be raised that had not been previously considered.

At a very early stage it became clear how much of the interview was taken up by families talking about their pre-adoption experiences. What had initially been seen as an introductory and information gathering part of the interview, had for many families taken up a considerable amount of interview time as they relived vivid memories of the adoption process. This might have been expected in the case of families who had very recently finalised the adoption and had only had their child living with them for a short length of time, and that they would have wanted to talk about this at length. However, even this early in the analysis it was becoming apparent that there were even families who had adopted several years earlier that still remembered vast amounts of detail about their pre-adoption experiences and were keen to talk about these to the researcher.

As the analysis developed it was found that on occasions one part of a transcript was identified as belonging to more than one category. There were several examples of this, one of which was where an interviewee might have been talking about the culture of their child's birth country. This sometimes occurred during a discussion about whether the parents thought it was appropriate to take their children to their birth country or perhaps when they were talking about their pre-adoption experiences or when they were talking about their child's birth country in their everyday life. Discussion about racism, differences in appearance and ethnicity were themes that were intertwined and overlapping and at times difficult to make decisions about where to use what material. When this happened it was important to keep systematic records about cross-indexing (Mason 2002) to track from where the data had been generated and where the data was used in the final report.

Two recurring themes throughout several of the interviews were that of uncertainty and where to go for advice and who to turn to for help with problems that were concerning them. As issues were raised during the interview the interviewee would respond but then begin to question themselves or they would respond how this was relevant to them and their family but they were unsure about what to do about it or where to go to for advice. Examples of this include situations where the children had been upset about name-calling

from children at school. The parents were unsure how to respond; were unsure if this was a form of racism or bullying and they did not know where to get advice. Many parents also expressed uncertainty about ways that they could incorporate the culture of their child's birth country in to their everyday lives but also were unsure about the necessity of doing this. Few parents talked directly about support but it was evident, after the early readings of the transcriptions that much of the uncertainty parents felt about certain issues might have been alleviated if there had been someone there to guide, inform and support them.

The analysis continued in a systematic manner comparing and refining sub-categories and themes. As suggested in Rubin and Rubin (1995) when there seemed to be a set of connecting themes the interviews were re-examined for evidence to ensure that the linkages were grounded in the data (p235). It was at this stage that it began to be possible to refine the themes and link them together to create a clear description of the parents' experiences of adopting children from overseas.

2.5 Summary and Discussion

This chapter has outlined the thinking and justifications behind the methods used for data collection. It has described the process by which the sample was accessed and the procedures and ideology underpinning the method of interviewing used. There follows a short discussion about some of the issues raised and suggestions about how things could have been done differently.

As a researcher working alone and being fully responsible for all aspects of the research an issue that was felt to be particularly important was the role of the researcher and the influence on both the method of data collection and the analysis and findings. As Jones (1985) describes it, the qualitative interview '.....is a complicated shifting social process

occurring between individual human beings, which can never exactly be replicated'. This however, is not to say that the 'bias' or values of the researcher were simply accepted as an intrinsic part of the research, but rather that they made the researcher sensitive to the way in which personal characteristics and biographies can affect interactions and subsequent production of knowledge during the research project (Reinharz 1992).

Despite support for researchers developing relationships with their respondents as a means by which to counter power differentials, Collins (1998) suggests that in reality it is rarely obvious where the balance of power lies during interviews. In many situations interviewers have limited control over, not only what is being said but also over whom we are during an interviewing. Power relationships change during the process of interviewing and the interviewee is not, at all times, a passive recipient controlled by the interviewer and the interview process - the situation is fluid and changing and is jointly constructed.

Reflecting about lessons that have been learnt from the way in which this research was undertaken can begin by looking at the sample population. The sample itself could have been more structured by choosing families who had all adopted from the same country or from a limited number of countries, families who had all adopted during the same time period or finally, families who all lived in the same locality. However, what would then be lacking is the opportunity to make comparisons across and between families adopting from different countries, at different time and living in different parts of the country.

The advantages of a smaller and more localised sample could have allowed for time to undertake follow-up interviews to discuss in more detail topics raised in initial interviews and possibly relationships could have been nurtured between families and researcher. Costs in both time and money would have been reduced. Limiting the research to

families adopting from a smaller number of countries could have allowed for more country-specific issues to be discussed in greater depth.

In this sample the age of the children influenced the range of post adoption experiences at the time of the interviews. The parents adopting from China, being some of the most recent, were all in the early stages of being a family and the main focus of discussion had been about their experiences of the actual adoption process. Their post adoption experiences were, in general, more limited than parents adopting from the other countries and only one of the Chinese children was in full time education. Therefore, their experiences were focused around the family, their friends and immediate neighbours. There were ten other children who, like the Chinese girls, did not attend school full time and again their experiences were more limited.

The presence of children during the interviews was an issue and in retrospect may have been seen as having influenced the responses of the parents. There were occasions when it did not seem appropriate to direct the interview or to focus upon too many negative aspects of the adoption in front of the children. It was clear the parents were very proud of their children and wanted the interviewer to meet them and to see how well the children had done since they had been adopted. However, it might have been that the parents knew that having the children there would limit the degree to which they would be challenged about certain issues.

This study should be regarded as exploratory in nature with a focus on understanding the experiences of a small number of adoptive families who have agreed to talk to the researcher in an informal way. The study provides important insights but caution must be employed when seeking to generalise the findings to a broader population of adoptive parents. Although not in any sense a representative sample, the interviews conducted proved to be a rich source of information about the experiences of adoption from overseas, providing an opportunity to explore different experiences associated with states

of origin, time of adoption and the culture of the country from which the children were adopted.

Chapter 3: History and Development

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the development of intercountry adoption (ICA) in the UK and examine the progress of adoption legislation since the early 1990s when intercountry first came to the attention of legislators and practitioners. The practice of intercountry adoption has, until the *Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act* 1999 come within the remit of domestic adoption and this has contributed to some of the problems for professionals and parents because rules and guidance for domestic adoption are not easily applicable to intercountry adoption. It is intended that this chapter will give an understanding of the context within which the adoptions in the study have taken place. In the final conclusion (chapter 11) there will be a consideration about whether legislation currently being implemented addresses all the issues raised throughout the thesis.

The first legislation relating to adoption (domestic) in England and Wales was the 1926 Adoption Act which for the first time created a legal relationship between adopters and adopted children similar to that between birth parents and their children. Adoption policy has always been influenced by the characteristics and needs of children in need of substitute families and for many years, culminating in the high numbers of the 1960s, a majority of children placed for adoption were 'illegitimate' babies born to unmarried mothers. However, a combination of several factors - the availability of contraception, abortion, reduction of social stigma relating to single parenthood and improvements in the benefits system - has meant there are fewer and fewer babies available for adoption in the UK and many couples wanting to build a family via adoption have looked overseas for foreign-born children (babies). As more families began to adopt from overseas it became apparent that situations were arising in which parents were flaunting the law and changes were needed to implement tighter (improved) regulation and guidance to both parents and professionals. Over a number of years beginning in the early 1990s this has

been happening but firstly a look at the growth of overseas adoption, with a focus on the UK.

3.2 History of Intercountry Adoption

The primary principle of ICA is to provide a child with a family where this cannot be provided in the child's own country; meaning the adoption of a child from one country by adults from a different country. Generally, it also means adoption by the Western world of children from the developing Third World usually children adopted from countries where families face extreme poverty and unwed mothers face stigmatisation (Goldberg, 1997) but, more recently, children are being adopted from politically and economically de-stabilised countries e.g. Russia and Romania.

Intercountry adoption has a fairly recent history but has been known since the post-war years, initially as a humanitarian movement in response to the needs of displaced children (Hoksbergen 1998, 2000). The adoption of unaccompanied children first began on a large scale after the end of the Second World War when significant numbers of children orphaned or separated from their parents in Europe (mainly Germany and Greece) were placed overseas for adoption, often in the USA (Tolfree 1995). Therefore, during this period, ICA was associated with war and destruction with many of the adopting families already having children of their own and ICA being seen as meeting the needs of children and as a way of expressing concern for people affected by war.

A more recent phase (1990-91), and one in which intercountry adoption began to emerge more fully in the UK, came after the revelations of the plight of children in institutions in Romania. Many British families went over to Romania and organised the adoption of a child themselves and many did not have the necessary official documentation. This rush to adopt children from Romania was not a trend reflected in all countries and families in Sweden and The Netherlands adopted few children from Romania. However, what the

Romanian situation did do was to expose the lack of policy on ICA in the UK, unlike in Scandinavia and the Netherlands where overseas adoptions are highly regulated.

However, in the last few years there is evidence from the Department of Health (DoH) of a growing number of ICAs from China (Brennan 2000)²⁸ – though many fewer pro-rata than in the USA and Canada (Selman 1997). Britain and UK adopters became aware of the situation in China when there was a secretly filmed documentary exposing the conditions in Chinese orphanages where the country's One Child Policy is causing many families to abandon their children, especially baby girls. Unlike the response to the Romanian crisis where couples went over independently, in China adoption from orphanages has been organised by the government and adoptions are channelled through a central agency (The China Centre for Adoption Affairs). Russia is different in that a law was passed in 1995 which allowed children to be adopted by families from other countries, and a register of children available for adoption was established (Selman 1998).

What this more recent phase has highlighted is that worldwide there has been a gradual shift away from adoptions driven by humanitarian desires to help abandoned children to one where ICA is led more by the demands of infertile couples unable to adopt in their own country (Hoksbergen 2000, Andersson 2000). The shift in emphasis has gone from 'families for children' to 'children for families' (Tolfree 1995). Part of the reason for this shift in motivation is that from around 1970, in many industrial countries, the number of children available for domestic adoption started declining sharply as a result of the social and demographic changes mentioned previously.

In Britain there are no official statistics about how many children are adopted from overseas and the availability of information varies according to whether the children have

²⁸ See Table 4.2.1: Adoption Applications in the UK received by the DoH in Chapter 4

been adopted from designated or non-designated countries and whether they have been brought into the UK with prior entry clearance - records of children brought in without entry clearance are incomplete. Added to this, there are no records of children adopted from designated countries if a local High Commission, embassy or Consulate in the sending country has made the application for entry clearance. However, the Department of Health record the number of applications made to them by families wishing to adopt a child from overseas (see Table 3.2.1) and from these records it is estimated ICA is on a very small scale in the UK compared to other countries, with only around 200-500 adoptions a year.

Table 3.2.1: Number of adoption applications (home study assessment reports) received by the Department of Health year ending 31 March,

Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
No. of Applications	162	331	212	264	312	326	329

During 2000 (January to December), 292 certificates of eligibility were issued for England and Wales (351 for the whole of the UK) but it is estimated that up to 100 other prospective adopters brought children into the UK without first being assessed and approved (DoH website 19/06/02). Intercountry adoption continues to be on a small scale compared with Scandinavia and the USA (see Table 3.2.2).

Table 3.2.2: Number of intercountry adoptions: USA, Sweden, Norway and Netherlands*

Country	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	1998
USA	2409	5633	5139	9285	7093	9679	15774
Sweden	1150	1517	1704	1560	965	895	928
Netherlands	192	1018	1594	1138	830	661	825
Norway	115	397	384	507	500	488	643

* Figures from Selman 2002 p211

It could be suggested that the small number of adoptions from overseas may be a consequence of there being no specialist adoption agency or adoption services for would-be adopters.²⁹ This has meant that prospective adopters have to rely on their own efforts and initiative - more about how parents manage procedures of adopting from overseas is presented in the following chapter.

However, it seems likely that China will continue as a source of children for prospective adopters but during the period 1st December 2001 to 30th November 2002 the Chinese Centre for Adoption Affairs (CCAA) placed a restriction on the number of adoptions allowed annually by each country. The restriction was imposed to allow the CCAA time to process a backlog of applications, which had built up over past months. The number of adoptions being allowed by British Citizens was 126 and this included adopters who were living abroad. However, whilst the DoH is keeping detailed records of the number of applications which are being processed for people living in the UK, they are unable to keep track of applications from anyone living overseas. The quota also differentiates between single or married adopters with a breakdown of 6 single adopters and 120 married adopters. Other restrictions on overseas adoptions include the Romanian moratorium announced in June 2001, for one year but it is still in place as at September 2003 and the Guatemalan Authorities made the decision in June 2003 to suspend intercountry adoptions of all applications received after 5 March 2003.³⁰

The management of quota systems such as those imposed by China is difficult for adoption professionals because, at the present time, there is no clear indication what is to happen in subsequent years i.e. will quotas be reintroduced? At a meeting of the Scottish ICA Forum in Edinburgh,³¹ (May, 2002) there was discussion about the problems of managing quotas as imposed by the Chinese authorities. Applications to adopt from

²⁹ Further discussion about dedicated intercountry adoption agencies can be found in Chapter 10.

³⁰ 17 September 2003 the DoH announced that the newly formed Central Authority in Guatemala had been dissolved and they are urgently seeking advice about how adoptions from Guatemala will proceed.

³¹ The researcher was present during this meeting.

China by Scottish adopters had exceeded the quota and workers were unsure what advice to give prospective adopters. Should it be suggested to parents that they may try to adopt from an alternative country or should they submit their application and go onto a waiting list in the hope their application will be accepted when the quota system ceases? It was also unclear whether Local Authorities should accept further applications for assessment. It can only be presumed that a similar situation exists in England and Wales but with no central agency or national co-ordination it is unclear how many applications and assessments are underway at any one time. In the future this could become problematic with the implementation of Adoption Standards (discussed later in this chapter) when it is expected time scales will be imposed.

3.3 Adoption Legislation

The legislation, which currently regulates adoption, domestic and intercountry, in England and Wales is the *Adoption and Children Act 2002*. However, the lead up to the Act has been long and hard. Beginning in the 1990s there were several attempts to reform adoption law, starting in 1991 when the government set up an inter-departmental review of adoption law of which intercountry adoption was a part. A series of discussion papers were published focusing on all aspects of adoption. Discussion Paper 4, published in January 1992, focused on intercountry adoption (DoH, 1992). It was apparent from this review that there were three possibilities regarding the future of ICA in the UK, first prohibition, secondly, leave things as they were and finally, greater regulation. The latter was seen as the way forward because it was felt that ICA could no longer be seen as an entirely private matter. The working group wanted ICA to be rigorously regulated and it concentrated on ways to put a stop to unauthorised adoptions. It was agreed that steps needed to be taken to protect the welfare of the children who are being adopted from other countries in the same way that the welfare of children adopted in the UK is being protected.

From ideas and discussions emanating from the inter-departmental review came the White Paper entitled *Adoption: The Future*, 1993 (DoH 1993 Cm2288). This was the first major development in adoption law and practice for nearly two decades. In the White Paper the government set out five main aims relating to the adoption of children from overseas (s.2.9). Briefly, they aimed to improve clarity and reliability of the process with a duty on local authorities to help parents seeking to adopt from overseas; to find ways to involve more voluntary adoption agencies; to clarify legal processes between receiving and sending countries; improve the system between adoption and immigrations processes; and, finally, enhance protection against abuses such as the neglect of birth families and financial inducements involved in ICA.

For the first time intercountry adoption was acknowledged as something that adoptive parents wanted and would continue to pursue and therefore their wishes should be respected and in all suitable cases supported and facilitated. At the same time the government wished to see the same principles and safeguards and, so far as is realistic, the same clarity of procedure introduced for overseas adoption as for domestic adoption (DoH 1993 s 6.10).

Taking on board the underlying principles of the 1993 White Paper, in 1996 there was publication of an Adoption Bill in the form of a consultative document entitled *Adoption – A Service for Children*. An underlying principle of the Bill was to make clear that intercountry adoption was a part of the Adoption Service and, therefore, it would be an offence for a person other than a parent or guardian to bring a child into the UK for the purpose of adoption without firstly satisfying requirements as prescribed in regulations. An additional and important aspect of this Bill was clause 88, which stated that regulations would be made enabling the UK to ratify the 1993 Hague Convention. This early publication, before introduction into Parliament, was to provide opportunities for practitioners, parents, adopters and adopted persons, as well as the general public to consider the document and make comments (DoH 1996). However, the lack of parliamentary time, and the change of government, meant that it was unable to proceed.

The next time adoption came onto the political agenda was in January 1999, when a Bill based on the 1996 *Adoption - A Service for Children*, but limited to intercountry adoption, was introduced to the House of Commons as a Private Member's Bill by Mark Oaten MP. It passed through Parliament, receiving Royal Assent on 27 July 1999, with few amendments, emerging as the *Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999*. The new Act introduced certain differences between domestic and intercountry adoption law, which it was felt needed to be separated by amendments to the domestic law. The main aim of this Act was to set in place, via legislation, procedures and processes, which would enable the UK to ratify the 1993 *Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* (see following section for further discussion). Within the bounds of the Act the Secretary of State would apply existing regulations (with appropriate amendments) and make new regulations to implement the conditions of the Convention.

As an aid for practitioners, on 12 November 2001 the Government published *Implementing the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 – Draft Regulations and Guidance for England and Wales* for consultation until 13 February 2002³². It was proposed that there would be regulations of a general nature, regulations for professionals and a specific set of regulations referring to the ratification of the Hague Convention. These included consideration about which parts of the Home Study Assessment report should go to the state of origin; who should be responsible for payments to Voluntary Adoption Agencies undertaking assessments; identify all possible offences regarding irregularities in ICA procedures and, finally, identify what would be a reasonable transitional period after implementation of new legislation for those already in the process of adopting from overseas. Included in the regulations are details of official procedures from convention countries, designated countries³³ and then a third set of

³² Regulations published in 2003 (DoH 2003b; DoH 2003d).

³³ Convention countries are those that have ratified or acceded to The Hague Convention and adoptions from designated countries are those that are recognised by the British courts.

guidelines for non-convention and non-designated countries. Further details of the draft regulations and guidance can be found in the DoH publication '*Implementing the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act*' 1999.

However, the *Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act* 1999 has now been superseded by the *Adoption and Children Act* 2002. The new Act incorporates most of the provisions of the *Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act*, 1999, which will largely be repealed in respect of England and Wales when the new Act is fully enacted. It is intended that the 2002 Act will incorporate amendments, which provide additional restrictions on bringing children into the UK for adoption and is aimed at ensuring that British residents follow the appropriate procedures when they adopt a child from overseas or bring a child into the UK for the purpose of adoption.

To ensure that people living in the UK and wishing to adopt a child from overseas follow the official approval procedure, whether they adopt the child abroad or in the UK, the Act enhances the safeguards in the 1999 Act. It incorporates the restriction in that Act on bringing a child into the UK for the purpose of adoption by a British resident, and provides a new restriction where a child is brought into the UK if the child has been adopted under the law of another country, which is not a Hague Convention adoption, within the previous six months. It also provides a new penalty making it an offence to bring a child from another country for the purpose of adoption unless the adopters have already been approved. In cases where children are brought into the UK by adopters who have not been approved, the minimum penalty will be twelve months imprisonment or an unlimited fine, or both. It will also provide restrictions on arranging adoptions and advertising children for adoption (through traditional media and electronically) other than through adoption agencies, and prohibits certain payments in connection with adoption.

The lead up to the new *Adoption and Children Act* 2002 began as we entered the new millennium where adoption once more came onto the political agenda. In February 2000

two adoption reviews were announced. The first came from the Conservative Party, under the direction of David Davis MP, who set up an adoption and fostering committee with a view to new legislation. The second from the Government, and Prime Minister, Tony Blair, announcing his personally commissioned review of adoption outlining his wish to make better use of adoption as a means of meeting the needs of children looked after by Local Authorities. He noted the 'importance of a stable and loving family life for children' and that he wanted more children to benefit from adoption. The Performance and Innovation Unit³⁴ of the Cabinet Office undertook the review and published their report on 7 July 2000 as a Consultation Document. Taking part in the review were representatives of most Local Authority Social Services Departments; six Voluntary Adoption Agencies; ten academics with working knowledge of adoption; twelve Voluntary Agencies; six people working in the legal/court system and finally representatives from five government departments. The review entitled, *'Prime Minister's Review: Adoption'* was mainly concerned with domestic adoption and included a total of eighty five recommendations and also some immediate 'forward actions' which would ensure progress was made quickly.

These 'actions' were to include the setting up of a national adoption register, which would contain information about approved adopters and children awaiting adoption. The aim was to set up a structure to speed up the 'matching' of children with parents around the country if local families could not be found for them. It can also be used as a monitoring tool. Tenders were made to the DoH and the eventual choice of 'preferred bidder' was made in 2001 and was to be Norwood Ravenswood, a leading child and family services agency who launched the register in July 2001. The first Annual Report was published in May 2003, by which time Norwood was being widely criticised for its performance with six hundred 'viable links' but only thirty placements made in the first year of operation.

³⁴ The Performance and Innovation Unit is a unit set up by the Government to take forward issues of particular interest to the Prime Minister.

In a press release on 21st December 2001 the Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn MP, the then Government's Secretary for Health announced 'the biggest overhaul for adoption in 25 years'. The White Paper entitled '*Adoption - a new approach*' was published a main aim of which was to set new targets to speed up the adoption process, the setting up of the above mentioned National Adoption Register aimed at reducing delays and enabling more children to be adopted, and with the Government committing itself to new adoption legislation (The Children and Adoption Bill). The setting of adoption targets for all local authorities which aims to increase by 40% before 2004-5 the number of looked after children adopted is seen by some as controversial and raises a number of issues about the practicalities of achieving such targets. The Adoption Register and the National Adoption Standards are key to transforming the adoption process and achieving this and will be monitored by an Adoption and Permanence Taskforce.

In March 2001 the *Adoption and Children Bill* was published and the House of Commons debated it at length. During his opening speech for the second reading debate the Secretary of State, The Rt. Hon Alan Milburn MP, proposed that it be referred to a Special Standing Committee to provide an opportunity for organizations and others outside Parliament to give their views on the new measures in the Bill. It was referred to a Select Committee which held three public hearings and received evidence from stakeholders, including adoption charities, and members of the public. Unfortunately, yet again the Bill fell in May 2001 when Parliament was dissolved for the General Election.

Following the Labour Party's re-election the Bill was reintroduced and had its first and second readings in the House of Lords in May and June 2002 proceeding to Committee Stage. A major area of controversy in the House of Commons proved to be the issue of allowing unmarried couples whatever their sexual orientation to adopt, which culminated in the Leader of the Opposition imposing a three line whip on those who opposed the proposed change. The amendment was eventually passed and on Thursday 7 November 2002 the *Adoption and Children Act 2002* gained Royal Assent and is now on the statute book. However, the new law will not be fully implemented until 2004, although some

parts came into force during 2003. The *Adoption (Support) Regulations* (DoH 2003) have now been agreed with implementation due on 31 October 2003. The publication of other draft regulations including those for intercountry adoption, have been delayed, although the DoH has published a revised *Intercountry Adoption Guide* (DoH 2003c).

However, regulating the adoption system via legislation and guidance at home cannot be enough to adequately 'police' intercountry adoption. There will always be a need for international agreements and this was the focus of the *Hague Convention on International Co-operation and Protection of Children in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* 1993 (The Hague Convention).

3.4 The Hague Convention 1993

The background to the Hague Convention was the serious social and legal problems which had been found to be arising because of the large number of intercountry adoptions worldwide which were insufficiently controlled and which had become parent-focused rather than child-centred. As ICA occurs on a world-wide scale, close international co-operation is seen as necessary if adequate protection of children and their families is to be assured. The Hague Conference on Private International Law, at its Sixteenth Session in October 1988, decided to undertake work on intercountry adoption. They recognised that a number of problems were not being addressed and that the Convention on Jurisdiction, Applicable Law and Recognition of Decrees Relating to Adoptions of November 15th 1965 had had no realistic impact on intercountry adoption, being ratified by only three countries, Austria, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Better relationships needed to be built between receiving and sending countries and this was to be based on mutual respect with high professional and ethical standards. A key assumption was that neither the countries of origin nor the receiving countries can

efficiently or effectively regulate ICA by themselves and the involvement of both is needed to ensure full recognition of an international adoption when properly carried out. The objective of the Convention was the creation of a system of co-operation between the sending countries and the receiving countries which would move towards guaranteeing the child's best interests, to prevent malpractice and to ensure the child's adoption was recognised in both countries.

In 1986 the *'Declaration on Social and Legal Principles Relating to Adoption and Foster Placement of Children Nationally and Internationally'* was adopted by the United Nations Assembly. This declaration is in the form of a set of recommendations rather than a treaty, and sets out a number of clear principles, including that of the child's best interests and the priority for children to be cared for by their own parents.³⁵ This principle of 'subsidiarity' became the underlying theme for the 1988 Hague Conference on Private International Law whose focus over the next five years was to be ICA. This focus on ICA was prompted by the increase in ICA as a worldwide phenomenon, and the complex human and legal problems that have arisen.

When countries ratify the Convention they take on a responsibility for ensuring that their standards and procedures with other convention countries conform to the Convention's principles. One major advantage of adoptions which take place between 'convention' countries is that there will be a mutual recognition of adoption orders which means there will be no need for adoptive parents to apply to the courts in their own country for a further adoption order. This will reduce the period of uncertainty over their child's legal status on return to the UK.

³⁵ In 1989 the recommendations were incorporated into the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which upholds the importance of seeing children as individuals but also as members of a family.

A central feature of the Hague Convention is the establishment of a Central Authority which oversees and takes responsibility for overseas adoptions and the authorisation of adoption agencies to facilitate adoptions from overseas. The 1999 *Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act* made the Department of Health the Central Authority in England, with a separate Central Authority for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The functions of accredited bodies will be carried out by local authorities or adoption agencies who have been approved to undertake intercountry adoptions.

The UK was one of the original signatories of the Hague Convention in 1993 and formally 'signed' in 1994 at the same time as the USA, but has only just passed legislation and regulations, which has enabled them to ratify and become a full member of the Convention as from 1 June 2003. Other major 'players' in relation to ICA, who have signed but not yet ratified the Convention include the USA and Ireland as receiving countries with China and Russia as examples of sending countries, the latter signing only in November 2000 and September 2000 respectively. The Republic of Korea which has sent more children for ICA than any other country was not a member of the Hague Conference and has not acceded to the Convention.

The Intercountry Adoption (Hague Convention) Regulations 2003 for England and Wales were laid before Parliament on 30th January 2003 and came into force on 1st June 2003. The regulations cover the two countries both as a receiving State and as a State of origin. Similar Regulations have also been made in Scotland and Northern Ireland, covering both countries as receiving State and as a State of origin. Those for Scotland were laid before the Scottish Parliament on 15th January 2003. In August 2003 the Isle of Man was added to the UK ratification.

A list of countries included in this research who have ratified or acceded to the Hague Convention can be found in Appendix F: Ratification of the 1993 Hague Convention. However, there is felt to be potential problems with the recent accession by Guatemala to

the Convention³⁶ because there have been ongoing difficulties related to childcare and intercountry adoptions from Guatemala. On the invitation of the Government of Guatemala, the Special Rapporteur for the commission on Human Rights visited the country during July 1999 (UN Commission on Human Rights 2000). The main concern for the visit was the sale of children for intercountry adoption. Intercountry adoption had developed into a profitable business as a result of the large number of children who had been orphaned or abandoned during the years of conflict in Guatemala. The information provided to the Special Rapporteur suggests that Guatemala has the weakest adoption laws in Central America. One of the main concerns was the locating of children for adoption and whether these children had been freely relinquished for adoption by the birth mothers. Lawyers, with the most to gain, actively sought babies for adoption and many were operating houses where children who are stolen or purchased are cared for while waiting to be adopted by families from overseas. Examples were found where networks of recruiters, hired by lawyers, pay rural midwives to register the birth of a non-existent child using false names. These birth certificates could then be used by other women who 'becomes' the mother of a baby - often stolen - which she then takes to Guatemala City to give it up for adoption. The Rapporteur gave the example of one woman who had relinquished thirty-three children in a two and a half year period. This only came to light in the visa section of the United States embassy. In other cases stolen babies were declared as abandoned and placed for adoption. On occasions pregnant women are encouraged to sell their unborn babies, which are then taken from them immediately after the birth.

The main problem, it was suggested, was the lack of clear guidelines either by way of legislation or by way of policy which was then linked to the vested economic interests of a small minority. They also noted that the best interests of the children available for adoption are rarely considered in the whole process because the adoption is purely a business transaction.

³⁶ Letters of objection have been written by The Netherlands, Canada, Spain and the UK - July 2003.

In response to these findings the Minister for Guatemala presented to the 54th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nation in October 1999 the means by which his country would change the existing situation relating to the sale of children. He told the gathering that as a means of taking greater control over international adoptions a Bill had been submitted to Congress entitled 'Adoption Law' under which there would be the establishment of an Adoption Council. This council will review the files of all children who are presented for adoption and will keep records of children who have been adopted and their adopters. Under this new law, biological mothers will undergo DNA tests to ensure she is the birth mother of the child being given for adoption. DNA testing of birth mothers has been the practice insisted upon by authorities in Canada, the USA and the UK since 1997. The practice of 'false' mothers presenting babies for adoption had come to light when the Canadian Embassy began carrying out DNA tests on babies and their 'mothers' in 1997. Many results demonstrated that the women giving up the babies were not the birth mothers. This was the spur for the UK and the USA also to demand DNA tests.

3.4.1 Conclusion

The Hague Convention 1993 is highly regarded as a means of regulating intercountry adoption and ratification of the Convention by the UK has been seen as the way forward. However, by the late 1990s, the Hague Conference had decided that there was an urgent need to review the workings of the Convention and set up a fourth *Special Commission on the Practical Operation of the Hague Convention of 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* which met between November and December 2000, issuing a final report in April 2001 (Hague Conference 2001).

3.5 Standards for Practice of Intercountry Adoption

Of major importance after the passing of legislation, is the implementation of services, which are both consistent and of a high quality. In England this was to be achieved by

the setting of *National Adoption Standards*, which would put children at the heart of services. In Spring 2000, the Department of Health asked the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) to co-ordinate the development of National Adoption Standards for England. The resulting draft Standards were published in December 2001, being issued for consultation in 2002 and put into effect from April 2003. It was also decided to prepare separate standards for stepparent and intercountry adoptions. The task of preparing a first draft of the *Intercountry Adoption Standards* was given to BAAF and the Network for Intercountry Adoption (NICA), an informal group which includes representatives of parents' groups, voluntary adoption agencies and others involved in ICA including lawyers and researchers. The hope was that the ICA Standards would, in as many ways as possible, parallel the National Adoption Standards for domestic adoption but taking into account the additional complexities in both the legal and procedural framework of ICA. The expectation is that meeting all of the National Adoption Standards for both domestic and intercountry adoption will ultimately become a statutory duty for local councils and voluntary adoption agencies, making adoption quicker, fairer and more sensitive to children's needs. In practice the *National Minimum Adoption Standards* have now been implemented in England but no further action has been taken in respect of the Intercountry (or the step-parent) Standards. The latest indication from the Department of Health is that a decision is to be taken by the new Minister for Children, the Rt. Hon. Margaret Hodge MP, but that it is felt that as the Minimum Standards apply to intercountry adoption, there is no need for separate ones for ICA, despite the huge amount of work put into the draft and the positive response from most of those who had seen this.³⁷ International Social Services (2000) fear that this is a sign of a continued marginalisation of overseas adoption and that an important opportunity may have been missed to ensure that those adopting from abroad have equivalent rights to support as domestic adopters and that attention is paid to the special issues of unnecessary delays which are caused by understaffing of Central Authorities.

³⁷ See Appendix G: for a copy of an email from Cathy Morgan about the possible delay or cancellation of these standards.

3.5.1 Adoption Leave

Another issue, which has been put on the political agenda with reference to adoption, is that of parental leave. Over the years thousands of children have benefited from being adopted into a loving family yet these families have not been entitled to parental leave or financial support as awarded to natural birth parents. To rectify this anomaly the Maternity and Parental Leave Regulations 1999 have been drawn up and came into force on 15 December 1999. The regulations include provisions on parental leave which apply to adoptive parents (domestic adoption only). A parent who has been continuously employed for at least a year and who has or expects to have responsibility for a child is entitled to thirteen weeks parental leave to care for that child. There is, at present, no statutory right to any pay for the period of leave and only families adopting a child who was born, or adopted, or placed for adoption, on or after 15 December 1999 are included. However, subject to Parliamentary approval it is expected that adoption leave and pay will be available to employees in relations to a child newly placed for adoption on or after 6 April 2003. The key features for the new framework for adoption leave are to include twenty-six weeks paid and twenty-six weeks unpaid leave (a total of one year). Parents are to notify their employer of planned date of leave once they have been matched with a child. The amount of notice to be given by an employee wishing to take parental leave should be at least twenty-one days but if the anticipated adoption placement is to be sooner this can be reduced.

However, with reference to those adopting a child from overseas it is the timing of parental leave and notification to employers, which can cause difficulties and was one of the issues under discussion during the consultation session (DTI, August 2001). Another problem can be the service qualification period and the notification period. The ideal point for qualification is when parents take responsibility for the care of a child but wide variations exist when adopting from overseas. For example, when adopting from China adopters are given 'permission to travel' some weeks prior to actually going to China at which point a named child will have been identified for adoption. If this is to be the date at which notification is to start some may not match the twenty-six weeks required. Also,

in some South American countries (e.g. Chile, Brazil) much longer stays are the norm where the child may or may not be placed with the adopters; in some cases a child has not been identified in advance of prospective adopters travelling overseas. In domestic adoption the adoption agency or local authority issues a certificate but no such certificate is available for those adopting from overseas. Decisions have to be made by the Department of Trade and Industry about whether parents can take parental leave whilst staying overseas or whether it has to be taken after returning to the UK.

3.6 Summary and Discussion

This chapter has outlined the history of intercountry adoption in the UK and described the development of adoption legislation, culminating in the *Adoption and Children Act 2002*. The history of adoption legislation in relation to both domestic and intercountry adoption, as indicated above, has been a long, and at times a tortuous process. Lack of Parliamentary time during the 1990s delayed the progress of two adoption bills and it was not until the late 1990s, and early in the new millennium that the long promised reforms in the legislation affecting intercountry adoption were finally achieved.

Implementation of the Hague Convention will give greater assurances to families adopting from overseas that what they are doing is well regulated and within the bounds of the law. However, it must also be remembered that, in line with the Hague principal of 'subsidiarity' intercountry adoption is to be seen as a solution for a children deprived of a normal family life if it is not possible to find a placement with relatives or through adoption or fostering within the child's country of birth. Receiving countries must not be seen to be pressuring sending countries to 'supply' them with children and sending countries must be encouraged to develop services for children which include rehabilitation to their birth family wherever possible and improvements in implementation of domestic adoption services. When both of these options have failed then adoption overseas may be in the best interest of the child because life on the streets is unacceptable to everyone.

The following chapter will give an insight into how parents experienced the process of adopting from overseas and how they found the lack of clear guidelines and procedures difficult to manage. It will also give an indication about the need to rely on other adopters for day-to-day information and support. The implications of these experiences will be set against the proposals in the new legislation and accompanying guidance and regulations - outlined above - in Chapter 11. The parents' experiences of support, with special reference to the role of parent support groups both before and after adoption, as well as a consideration about the future development of specialist intercountry adoption agencies, will be examined further in Chapter 10.

Chapter 4: The Process of Adopting a Child from Overseas

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter contained an outline of the recent history of intercountry adoption along with developments in adoption legislation. It is intended that this will have given the context within which the adoption experiences being explored in this research are to be understood. The focus of this chapter will be on the experiences of families going through the process of adopting a child from overseas. It will outline how families have experienced the procedures, which are necessary to go through in both the UK and the country from which they are adopting. The aim is to gain a better understanding about the way in which intercountry adoption procedures are managed and will make recommendations about the future direction of policies and the implementation of new legislation. At the same time this will give a greater insight into the impact of policy and practice on the lives of those to whom the regulations are directed.

Intercountry adoption is a complex and bureaucratic process in which parents have to follow the regulations as outlined in legislation in the UK and at the same time following those of the country from which they wish to adopt. Complying with procedures in two countries can at times cause complications and access to correct, up to date information is vital. Certain information has become easier to access today than it was in the past, but as the experiences of the families in this study will highlight, even the more recent adopters had problems at times following correct procedures and accessing accurate information. Information is currently available in the form of Fact Sheets from the Department of Education and Skills (Dfes) – prior to 2004 adoption was the responsibility of the Department of Health³⁸, the Overseas Adoption Helpline (OAH)³⁹,

³⁸ These are now available via the Department of Education and Skills website www.dfes.gov.uk/adoption
³⁹ Now available to purchase via the Overseas Adoption Helpline website [under construction] (2003).

Overseas Adoption Support and Information Services (OASIS) and parent support groups⁴⁰, however, this can never be definitive because the situation in the different countries is always changing. There are, limitations however, to the usefulness of websites because they may not be up-dated on a regular basis and generally caution is needed when accessing information via the web. Therefore, it seems reasonable to ask, where do prospective parents obtain information? This chapter looks at a series of alternative means by which the parents learnt about procedures and requirements of different systems in the UK and overseas.

Along with difficulties obtaining accurate and up-to-date information access to guidance, support is still in its infancy as the experiences of the parents in this study clearly illustrate. By taking a closer look at these experiences a clearer understanding about what it has taken to achieve parenthood via overseas adoption will be obtained. The first part of the 'process' is the decision to adopt from overseas in preference to adopting within the UK and to begin by asking why prospective parents decide to travel thousands of miles, venture upon an un-chartered journey rather than choosing to adopt domestically where there are experienced adoption agencies and adoption workers with clear guidelines and codes of practice.

After enquiring about reasons for adopting overseas there will be a closer examination about adopters' experiences of obtaining a Home Study Report which is an assessment of their potential as prospective parents; this is a requirement for all adoptions in both the UK and the sending countries. It is hoped to illustrate parents' perceptions of the usefulness of such assessments and how relationships between parents and social workers are managed during the home study. These findings will be evaluated against three earlier accounts of the adoption process from the perspective of UK adopters. These are the research findings of the International Bar Association Report (Mostyn and Bennett

⁴⁰ See more on parent support groups in chapter 10.

1991)⁴¹, the edited book by Humphrey and Humphrey (1993) which includes eight first hand accounts from parents adopting from five different countries and finally, a more recent personal account about adopting from China by Shead (2000).

The first of these the, IBA Report (Mostyn and Bennett 1991), was based on the response to a postal questionnaire by two hundred and thirteen adoptive parents who adopted children from twenty three different countries between six months and ten years or more before completion of the questionnaire. Briefly, the conclusions suggested the procedure was very much a do-it-yourself process with, at that time, little co-operation between statutory authorities and parents, which on occasions resulted in:

“conflict instead of co-operation, obstruction instead of constructiveness, a clash of philosophies and values and suspicion and resentment on both sides. The processing of the papers inevitably takes longer, creating a great deal of uncertainty for all concerned.” (IBA 1991 p21)

The authors also noted the lack of consistency regarding the services offered, or not offered, in what they referred to as, the ‘clash of class’ with different economic groups of parents receiving different levels of service. In addition there were regional variations suggesting that families living in the Midlands were more likely to have a co-operative local authority with those living in Scotland, the South West, North West, Wales, the South East and the conurbations not getting the same level of co-operation. The perspective from which this report was written does not appear to question the ethics of intercountry adoption, and the focus is on the positive benefits adoption brings to the children. The report was critical of a system which hinders, delays or closes down opportunities for adopting children from overseas and suggest that the outcome of such hindrances is that:

⁴¹ Findings from this research can also be found in Bennett (1994).

“.....many of the babies and children who could escape institutionalisation, or life on the streets, as well as physical and emotional deprivation are being deprived of their basic right to a family as enshrined in the UK Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989.” (IBA 1991 p21)

The four main recommendations from the parents’ perspective was that better information and support was needed, improvements in Entry Clearance procedures, changes in the attitude of the LASSDs and finally greater knowledge about intercountry adoption by lawyers and judges is also important.

In contrast to the above research, the accounts in the Humphrey and Humphrey (1993) book are individual accounts, each with their own style, but, as the editors suggest, the accounts do ‘convey an authentic flavour of what it means to adopt a child from abroad’ (p10). In their overview of the individual stories Humphrey and Humphrey advocate a more flexible approach to the procedures involved in adopting a child from overseas. They talk about the ‘obligatory’ Home Study Assessment as always being ‘potentially a source of difficulty but has recently become a much more serious obstacle’ (p9) and suggest that the assessment process itself has become unduly rigorous. Several of the parents had used independent social workers in preference to having a local authority assessment, which at that time was particularly difficult to obtain because many Local Authorities were ideologically opposed to overseas adoptions. However, since the time of writing their stories, all local authority departments are now required, if requested, to undertake such work and within the Adoption and Children Act 2002⁴² it is now illegal to have private Home Study Assessments done by independent social workers (DoH 2002). Humphrey and Humphrey write about the closing of this ‘loophole’ and question what the ‘full impact of this restriction’ (p10) may be in the future. By implication they do not appear to favour increased regulation by government departments but do note that overall

⁴² Originally in the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 now superseded by the Adoption and Children Act 2002

they found attitudes to protocol differed from couple to couple with some anxious to observe correct procedures whilst others were more willing to cut corners.

Shead (2000) writes about his experiences of adopting from China which began in 1992 when he first thought about adopting from China. There have been few published accounts of the adoption process in the UK written from the adopter's perspective despite many parents having written their stories in newsletters of different parent support groups but these are only available for members of the group. The internet is becoming increasingly popular and there are many accounts written by adopters in the USA about their experiences of adopting from many different countries. However, there are very few such accounts from UK families although this will probably change in the near future. Shead notes that in many ways his experiences were typical of other families adopting from China but he also includes particulars that differ from the norm. This account is also of interest and pertinent to this research project because it is more recent than the above mentioned reports (Humphrey and Humphrey 1993, Mostyn and Bennett 1991) and China, since 1995, has become one of the main countries from which families living in the UK have been adopting (Brennan 2000). Writing nine years later than the IBA report he notes that there are still wide variations in the way prospective adopters are received by local authorities which he describes as ranging:

“.... from the welcoming and informed, though this is a rarity, through the impartial to the actively hostile.” (Shead 2000 p469)

He also discusses the levels of control possessed by others in the form of different statutes, regulations, rules and accepted procedures and practices, which leave parents with little, control themselves. Unlike earlier adopters who were not given the opportunity to attend preparation classes Shead and his wife attended such a course. Their experiences were mixed and despite the classes being well planned they experienced them as 'stilted', feeling that all those present were unable to let down their guard; added to this the content was not always appropriate to their needs because the

course was run jointly for domestic and overseas adopters. Further discussion about preparations classes will be included later in the chapter.

What all three of the above-mentioned accounts have in common is that they show how adopting a child from overseas is a long, lonely and uncertain task. At a conference presentation in 1994 Barbara Mostyn, talking about her earlier IBA (Mostyn and Bennett 1991) research commented that ICA 'is a daunting, DIY, trial and error procedure which is very lonely and anxious-making' (p7), an experience which is reiterated in Shead (2000) and Humphrey and Humphrey (1993) and will be seen to be the experience of many parents in this research. It is hoped to highlight and examine similarities and differences and suggest why experiences have changed or possibly, why they have not changed. The research sample for this study includes parents who adopted during the same time period as the parents in each of the above mentioned accounts, plus a small number of more recent adoptions (see Table 2.4.2 Year families adopted from each country and continent).

In addition to outlining and examining the experiences of these adoptive families the findings will be considered against the above accounts and against alternative 'models' of managing overseas adoptions and supporting prospective adopters through the adoption process. From this it may be possible to suggest alternative ways in which ICA could, in the future, be managed in the UK. The findings will also be examined against recent legislation to see whether proposed changes adequately address inherent problems in the current system and whether tighter regulations sufficiently address ethical dilemmas surrounding the rights, wrongs and need for intercountry adoption.

4.2 Making Decisions

4.2.1 Choosing to become a parent

Creating a family today can take many forms of which adoption is only one and becoming a parent is part of the family life cycle with parenthood being seen as a 'natural' and inevitable stage in adult development. However, what was apparent during the research interviews was the adoption had important to the husbands. An indication of this was the fact that out of a total of thirty-one interviews thirteen husbands were present, and three fathers were interviewed without their wives. Taking into account that there were seven single female adopters this meant there were only eight husbands not taking an active part in the research, but five of these were met informally at one of the children's birthday party. It was also evident that the husbands, as well as the wives had been actively involved during the whole of the adoption process and were as much a driving force and motivators in their desire to adopt internationally. In the case of two families adopting from China it had been the husband who first mentioned the possibility of adopting from overseas. It was after reading an article in a newspaper (e.g. Leslie 1996) about the television programme *The Dying Rooms* in 1995 (Woods and Blewett, 1995) that one of the husbands (06) mentioned the possibility of adopting from overseas. He came home from work and raised the matter with his wife who, in her own words says:

"It was just like a mask lifting and I knew that was what he wanted to do." (06)

The other husband (02) saw a television programme about families who had adopted from lots of different countries in 1990. It was he who then phoned the named organisation listed at the end of the programme and got the pack with details of several different countries outlining the procedures and requirements.

Andersson (2000) identified similar 'triggers' for overseas adoptions in Sweden. She suggests that it was media coverage of the war in Europe and in Korea which motivated many parents, for humanitarian reasons to adopt children from outside Sweden.

However, these events did not have a similar impact in the UK and it was not until media coverage of Romanian children in orphanages in 1991 that prospective adopters began to consider overseas adoption. However, one mother who adopted from Guatemala did state that her main motivation for adopting from overseas came after reading about the plight of street children in different parts of the world:

“What happens is they have a lot of children who go and live on the street when they are five or six and then what happens is the children steal from the shops and things and the shop keepers band together and the children are rounded up and they get shot. Life is cheap over there. It is absolutely terrible. People don’t realise the situation.” (31)

4.2.2 The decision to adopt from overseas

The main reason given for choosing overseas adoption as a means of achieving parenthood was the infertility problems of couples and many adopters are over the acceptable upper age limit for adoption in the UK (Mason 1999). One of the families adopting from Sri Lanka explained how their infertility treatment had taken up a number of year:

“I had all kinds of fertility treatment, none of which worked. It cost us thousands because of my age, we had to go privately and it just went on and on and on.” (10)

In this particular research sample there were five families with birth children. One of the seven single female adopters had birth children from an earlier marriage but had wanted to have more children and adoption was her preferred option. It is uncertain whether the remaining six single adopters could or could not have conceived if they had wanted to. The family who had adopted from Peru (23) in 1993, had been experiencing fertility problems, but after having adopted from overseas went on and had three children of their own. The remaining three married couples who had birth children, the decision to adopt from overseas was because they were now experiencing problems in conceiving or carrying a child to full term and adoption was their second choice.

The exact reason why prospective adopters decide to adopt from overseas in preference to adopting a child from the UK is multifaceted with one of the most common reasons being the shortage of babies available. Because there are so few babies available the eligibility criteria demanded by most UK adoption agencies are very prescriptive and which generally means many prospective adopters fall outside the boundaries of the types of families with whom they want to place their babies who need new families. In many cases the children available for adoption are older children and most prospective first time adopters do not feel they have the ability and experience to parent a child with 'special needs' (Shead 2000; Humphrey and Humphrey 1993; Mason 1999). Similar reasons for choosing overseas adoption were given in the IBA Report (1991) and the research of Hoksbergen et al (1987).

Parental motives for adopting from overseas vary and Hoksbergen et al (1987) have categorised parents as either being 'internally-oriented' or 'externally-oriented', where infertility is a reason for adopting this would be classified as being 'internally-oriented'.⁴³ It is a desire to have a child, which is more important to these parents than the wish to help a parentless, needy child. Where parents who may already have children of their own and have a more political or humanitarian motive they are classified as being 'externally-oriented'. Research studies have shown that as many as ninety percent of all intercountry adopters state that involuntary childlessness is their main motive for adoption - this can be those who have no children or those who want more children (Dalen and Saetersdal 1987, Cederblad 1994, Botvar 1994). It might also be the case that the externally-orientated parents who adopt from overseas have more awareness about issues in third world countries and have empathy with the plight of children from these countries. This can sometimes be because they have lived or worked overseas for a period and understand firsthand what conditions are like in these countries and they may have experienced being one of the minority if they did live overseas for any length of time. After these families have adopted a child from overseas they may be more likely

⁴³ In the Hokesbergen et al (1987) study of families in the Netherlands who had adopted children from Thailand the motivation for three-quarters of their sample was 'internally-oriented'.

to see themselves as a mixed-race family. This may enable them to have a better understanding of what it is like for their children to be part of an ethnic minority group, as they will also see themselves as a member of this mixed-race society. The motivation of the majority of families in the current study would be considered to be 'internally-oriented' because, as outlined above, the main reason given for adopting was that they were unable to have children of their own.

After parents have made the decision to adopt a child from overseas their first point of contact will invariably be their LASSD. However, there is always a possibility that prospective adopters could be turned down for a variety of reasons. Two families who had adopted from Sri Lanka (10 and 16) approached their local social services department to enquire about domestic adoption and/or fostering before considering overseas adoption but neither enquiry came to fruition. One family who went on to adopt two children from Sri Lanka (10) were turned down by their local authority and they were quite bitter about this because they felt they were never given an adequate explanation as to why they had been considered unsuitable as adoptive parents. They also felt that attempting domestic adoption had wasted valuable time, time which could have been spent on the intercountry adoption process. Despite preferring to adopt a baby this family was prepared to consider adopting an older child but even this ran into problems which the family felt were not adequately explained to them:

"The only thing they would allow us, they said they would allow us an older child. And when we tried to adopt an older child they said, 'sorry, no, you need to have experience'. Obviously we do not want to take an older child because we have no experience. We tried practically every borough in London. We tried Dr Barnardos, we tried the independent adoption people. We tried everything and we just weren't getting anywhere." (10)

One of the single mothers who adopted from China (01) had also applied to adopt domestically and she too had been turned down for what she saw as an inadequate reason and this had left her feeling 'very bitter'. She was not sure why she had been turned down but the social worker had commented about the number of books about the house and as most of the children available for adoption in this country were from working

class families they would not be used to a home with so many books. She felt this was the only reason she had been given which deemed her as unsuitable adopter for a child from the UK care system.

However, there were also parents who knew about the domestic adoption situation and did not think this was for them. Three of the families, who went on to adopt from China, had considered domestic adoption but none felt able to take on the responsibility of an older child and the likely problems the child would bring with them. Therefore, an infant from overseas was seen as a preferable option. One of these mothers was a social worker and she was fully aware about the situation in the UK re adoption and the fact they would be offered an older child:

"I knew from my experiences as a social worker children were coming into care because of rather a lot of unpleasant circumstances both physical and emotional and how that may damage the child by the age the child is placed for adoption."
(03)

A different type of experience was that of family (16) who were a young couple living in the north of England who were accepted by their local authority as being suitable for domestic adoption. However, they were advised that they might experience considerable delays in having a child placed with them because they were Jehovah's Witnesses. In the UK relinquishing parents can indicate the type of family they would like their children to be placed with. It is not always possible to meet these criteria but where possible social services will try and for this reason it was unlikely that a child would be placed with this family. Therefore, they decided that it might be better to not wait but to try adopting from overseas.

It does seem to be the case that humanitarian reasons for adopting overseas, in this sample group, were in the minority, and most families had in fact chosen to adopt overseas to satisfy their own needs to be parents, with the needs of the children being a secondary consideration. Before finalising their decision prospective adopters do become

aware of the tragic circumstances of children around the world and the more they looked into adopting abroad the more concerned they became. Abandonment, poverty, institutionalisation and neglect was seen as the future for many children and their rescue became important. These are some of the considerations influencing prospective adopters in their choice of country from which to adopt, others will be considered in more detail below.

4.2.3 Deciding which country to adopt from

The choice of countries from which to adopt is wide-ranging and ever changing. Brennan (2000), writing when he was a Principal at the Department of Health responsible for adoption policy, produced figures indicating that families in the UK had adopted from sixty six different countries since 1993 (the year statistics started to be collected by the DoH) up until the year 2000. However, thirty-three of these countries only sent one or two children during this period. The history of intercountry adoption shows that the popularity and availability of countries change over time and are influenced by social and economic factors. In the last few years there is evidence from the Department of Health of a growing number of adoptions from China (Brennan 2000, Selman 2002) and Table 4.2.1 shows the trends in countries from which UK families have been adopting during the period 1993-2000. However, these figures give no indication about the numbers of families who circumvent the system and do not submit applications to the Department of Health (DoH).

Table 4.2.1: Adoption Applications received by the Department of Health*

Country	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	1993-2000
1. China	3	17	59	206	110	123	149	136	803
2. India	16	20	22	29	21	22	19	10	159
3. Guatemala	2	3	12	16	26	20	15	20	114
4. Romania	22	14	9	10	5	17	18	13	113
5. Thailand	4	10	5	10	10	13	21	38	111
6. Russia	1	4	4	3	3	13	10	9	47
7. USA	4	0	8	4	5	8	5	12	46
8. Paraguay	8	16	6	1	1	0	0	0	32
9. Brazil	3	3	7	4	4	3	4	1	29
10. Philippines	7	2	1	5	4	4	1	3	27
11. Sri Lanka	4	6	3	2	3	0	2	2	22

*Figures from Brennan (2000)

It is apparent that Sri Lanka, one of the countries from which eight families in the thesis have adopted, is becoming less and less popular, yet figures from the IBA Report (1991) show Sri Lanka was at that time the most popular country with seventeen percent of the overall sample adopting from there. Adoptions from China began in earnest in 1996 when a total of two hundred and six applications were received by the DoH, and between the years 1993 and 2000 adoptions from China represented forty seven per cent of all adoptions into the UK. Details of the range of countries from which this sample have adopted is included in the methodology section and a more detailed account of the general changing demography of intercountry adoption is available in Selman, (2000 and 2002).

The choice of country from which to adopt can be influenced by many factors including previous links with the country, costs, an awareness or knowledge of systems in a particular country and finally, and most importantly which country is currently allowing children to be adopted overseas. Sending countries themselves have criteria about whom

they consider appropriate as adoptive parents and about systems within which they wish to work. A worldwide look at adoption statistics shows differences both in sending and receiving countries. In relation to sending countries a look back over time shows how, at one time a country may be sending large numbers of children overseas for adoption but then they discontinue with such policies or, alternatively how some sending countries have a preference for working with a small number of receiving countries. A major sending country, Korea, has never allowed children to be adopted into the UK because there are no intercountry adoption agencies with whom they can work. Andersson (2000), writing about Sweden's experiences of ICA over the last thirty years is a good illustration about the vagaries of links between sending and receiving countries. She outlines how Sweden and the Adoption Centre was readily accepted as a receiving country by Vietnam because of 'lasting goodwill of our late prime minister Olof Palme and Sweden's long standing political relations with Vietnam' (p351). Therefore, care needs to be taken when talking about parent's choices in choosing a country from which to adopt because there will be as many constraints as there are options. Parents will firstly have to find out which countries are prepared to work with adopters from the UK. These requirements will be more to do with official procedures than with individual attributes of prospective adopters. It is only then will they need to find out about specific requirements related to the adopters. Therefore choices and decisions will be influenced by the history and the geography of the country where adopters are living and the country from which they wish to adopt from, as about individual decision making i.e. a number of external constraints.

The majority of families in the sample did not have an immediate or clear idea about which country they were able to adopt from or from which country they wished to adopt. Therefore, a degree of 'shopping around' had to take place before the process could get underway - applications cannot be submitted until a decision has been made about which country to adopt from and only one application can be made at a time. In the IBA Report (1991) prospective adopters, on average, made five initial contacts with people or consulates overseas to enquire about the possibility of adopting a child and the availability of children for adoption.

4.2.4 Which country to adopt from? – influencing factors

Language

One family who adopted from Sri Lanka (16) in 1990 had initially thought about adopting from other countries with their first choice being El Salvador. They had thought about El Salvador because they had met a family who had adopted a child from there. However, when they tried to make contact by telephone with the recommended lawyer in El Salvador they were connected to someone who only spoke Spanish, which made them realise just how difficult it was going to be because neither of them spoke Spanish. Taking time to consider what to do next, they were told about a family who had adopted from Sri Lanka. As they had been on holiday there and liked the country and the people this was the route they decided to take. Religion, which had been the main reason they were unable to adopt domestically, was not a problem in Sri Lanka because any forms asking about religion only had one category for 'Christianity', which Jehovah's Witnesses are. At the time this family, and all others in the sample who adopted from Sri Lanka, were making decisions about which country to adopt from, neither China or Russia were available options.⁴⁴

Costs

There were a total of five families who said that their first choice of country had been in Latin America but then explained they had changed their minds for a number of reasons. One of the Sri Lankan adoptive families (14), prior to thinking about ICA had travelled extensively in Latin America, and the husband was a lecturer in Latin American studies. So Latin America was an obvious choice for them and they first tried Paraguay but found 'prices' were rapidly increasing and their social worker pointed out the benefits of adopting from Sri Lanka. One main advantage of adopting from Sri Lanka is that it is on

⁴⁴ By 1995 China and Russia had emerged as the main sources of children both for the USA and many other countries (Selman 1999, 2002).

the UK's designated list⁴⁵ so there would be no need for a re-adoption after returning to the UK. Two other families (10, 22) mentioned the high cost of adopting from Latin America and suggested it was the high demand from USA families that was inflating prices. Families from the USA have the ability and the willingness to pay ever-increasing costs of adopting from overseas. One family (28) had thought about Brazil and during a holiday over there had made enquiries about adopting a child but what they heard or found out did not encourage them. They felt the way intercountry adoptions were handled felt more like a business transaction where the child was the commodity:⁴⁶

"Send your money in the post and the baby would arrive in a box, sort of thing. We didn't want anything to do with that." (28)

Links with the country

Some families saw previous links with a country as a positive motive for adopting from that country. Two families adopting from Sri Lanka (22,28) had been there on holiday and enjoyed both the country and the people; the husband and wife in another family who also adopted from Sri Lanka (27) were frequent travellers as part of their work and they had been to Sri Lanka before their decision to adopt from there. Links with the sending country may not have always been a major influence but for one family after the decision had been made they began to realise links that did exist and this was seen as a bonus. For example, one of their fathers had been stationed in Sri Lanka during the war (RAF) and had loved the place:

"He seriously thought of staying on at the end of the war but he decided it wasn't right for mother." (22)

Added to this the wife remembered a boyfriend from her youth who had been raised in Ceylon:

"He talked about Ceylon [Sri Lanka] and these things keep coming back to me." (22)

⁴⁵ A list of 'designated' countries is available on the DoH website www.doh.gov.uk/adoption

⁴⁶ Nevertheless there are nine families in the sample who did adopt from Latin America

The choice of Sri Lanka for this group of families was influenced by the cost of the adoption, prior links or knowledge of the country and finally the fact that Sri Lanka is a designated country whose adoptions are recognised by the British courts eliminating the need for a second adoption in the UK. This was seen as particularly important for one of the families (16) who had two sets of friends adopting from overseas, one from El Salvador and another from Paraguay and each had experienced major problems with their Social Services departments after returning to the UK.

Legal concerns

An important factor, particularly for those choosing to adopt from China, was that the system was straightforward and was acknowledged as being, at all stages, legal. There was no doubt that the children had been abandoned, were officially available for adoption and intermediaries were government bodies in both the UK and China. This eliminated doubts about how payments were being used and that bribery or buying of babies was not happening.

Parents told about stories they had heard about illegalities in some Latin American countries and the Cook Report (1996) highlighted illegalities in some adoptions from Guatemala. A concern expressed clearly by one mother was as follows:

“We didn’t want to go to South America because we were worried that we might have got a baby that had been bought or sold or snatched from its parents. So we wanted to adopt from a country that we knew the child was really abandoned and really was needing a home and there was so much in the press about South America and lawyers and dollars changing hands. We didn’t want to live with the knowledge that, well did the birth mother want to part with the child or had she been pressured for money?” (09)

This extract from one of the parents who had adopted from China sums up the general attitude of many families. Systems in some countries may be bureaucratic and at times slow but at least parents are assured that they are legal.

Meeting a specific child

Three of the four families adopting from Romania were untypical of the examples above and of other adopters from Romania. Their decision to adopt had happened after they had visited Romania and met a specific child and felt impelled to adopt. Two of the single mothers had been in Romania delivering equipment as members of a charitable convoy and when they visited an orphanage they met a child to whom they felt drawn. It was only from that point that they began to consider adoption. Both women were single, one in her twenties and the other nearing forty but parenthood had not been a consideration for either of them. In fact the older of the two women joked about how her friends were going to 'have her certified' after hearing of her intention to adopt a two year old boy. She had never wanted to be a mother and they could not understand why she had changed her mind so suddenly. The younger mother took some time to make the commitment but after returning home to England found she could not get the special little boy out of her mind. She felt compelled to return to find out how he was getting along, which she did on several occasions and each time it became harder to leave him behind. Eventually she decided to apply to adopt him. By the time the adoption had gone through the boy was eight years old. The third adoption of this type was by a married couple who had two children and whose husband had a number of church related links with Romania. On one of his visits his wife accompanied him along with one of their children and a friend. Unlike the two single adopters it was not a particular child that attracted their attention but the whole situation of the orphanages and the plight of the children in them. They knew they could do little to alleviate the situation of the majority but felt that if they could do something special for at least one of them they would have done the best they could. They returned home to take time to gain control of what they felt were their emotions running out of control before making the final decision. Eventually they decided to return to one of the orphanages and try to adopt a child. At their chosen orphanage three small girls were presented to them as being available for adoption. From the mother's account the girls were described as each being different: one was completely 'glazed over', one was as 'bright as a button' having only come into the orphanage the day before and finally the third who was two and a half, was curled in a foetal ball and was screaming:

'She was just screaming, so frightened and she screamed all the time. She was obviously going to be really, really difficult to place.' (17)

She could not eat properly only drinking vegetable soup; she could sit up but not walk. This was the child they chose to adopt.

Personal contacts

Personal links or opportunistic meetings and information influenced the decision of several of the families adopting from the Latin American countries. The single mother adopting from El Salvador (11) had friends living in the USA who knew about adoptions from El Salvador and offered to enquire and get information about procedures. It was with the help of this friend that a very quick, relatively simple adoption took place. Similar stories were told by the two families adopting from Brazil i.e. the influence of friends in choosing Brazil. The majority of the adoptions from Latin America and all those from Sri Lanka took place before China became an option and were influenced by information and support from friends and other overseas adopters i.e. informal links. When the adoptions from China began there was greater awareness about the possibilities of adopting from overseas because of media coverage about adoption from Romania. Also, there were beginning to be a number of organisations from whom information was available. The Overseas Adoption Helpline (OAH) came on line in 1993⁴⁷, AFAA (Association for Families who have Adopted from Abroad) a parent support group, were awarded a lottery grant to develop information systems for members and OASIS (Overseas Adoption Support and Information Services)⁴⁸ began in 1995 with a main objective of supporting prospective adopters through the adoption process (Way and Mason 2000). Therefore, within the limits of a constrained choice, via specifications and requirements demanded by both the UK and the sending countries, more recent adopters are now able to make their decisions on the basis of 'informed choices'.

⁴⁷ For the history and development of OAH see Haworth (2000).

⁴⁸ For the history and development of OASIS see Fleming (2000).

4.3 Procedures in the UK

4.3.1 Obtaining a Home Study Report

The formal system for bringing children to the UK for intercountry adoption is complex and bureaucratic and it is important to emphasize that procedures for adopting children from overseas vary from country to country. However, once the decision has been made to adopt from overseas usually the next step is to get a Home Study Assessment Report completed.⁴⁹ However, who does the Home Study Assessment has been an issue in relation to intercountry adoption. It has been illegal since 1982 to make private arrangements for domestic adoptions but this has not been the case for adoptions from overseas. In the past there was no control over who did the home study and if prospective adopters preferred they could employ independent social workers instead of applying to adopt through their local authority. This worked because the placement and often the adoption took place overseas and therefore, if the authorities in the sending countries were prepared to accept reports which had been prepared by independent social workers this was what many parents did. On occasions, in the past this was the only way to proceed because some LASSDs were not prepared to undertake assessments of prospective adopters who were adopting children from overseas. This was partly to do with ideological opposition to ICA on behalf of social workers but also because resources were limited and social services departments were generally felt to be working under pressure with limited resources. However, not all local authorities opposed intercountry adoption and Hampshire County Council have, since 1990, had a dedicated intercountry adoption service. In response to enquiries made after the Romanian crisis the decision

⁴⁹ Implemented in June 2003 the Intercountry Adoption (Hague Convention) Regulations 2003 set out the requirements and procedures with reference to the eligibility and suitability of prospective adopters, notification of decisions and duties imposed on adoption agencies - none of which were available at the time that any of adoptions in this research were taking place.

was made to set up specialist overseas adoption service (Harnott 2000)⁵⁰.

Since September 1990 it has become a requirement of all Local Authority Social Services Department to conduct Home Study Assessments for prospective overseas adopters requesting such an assessment and under section 13 of the *Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act* 1999 home studies should now only be done by approved adoption agencies.⁵¹ A local authority circular [LAC (2001)14] stated that local authority adoption agencies must carry out assessments of the suitability of prospective overseas adopters in line with assessment practice for domestic adoption. However, in the *Department of Health Intercountry Adoption Guide* (2003) they state that prospective adopters have a right to an assessment but this 'does not equate to a right to be assessed within a particular period' (DoH 2003c). The changes in 1990 making it a 'requirement' for local authorities to undertake Home Study Assessments did not however mean that parents discontinued using independent social workers. Many sending countries continue to accept such assessment reports and some Local Authorities were still uncooperative about undertaking such work and sometimes parents found themselves placed on long waiting lists before assessments would be started.

An additional advantage of having a private Home Study Assessment, as seen by the parents, was that they were quicker and cheaper than those done by the local authority, and the social workers specialised in assessments for families adopting from overseas. However, there is also the argument that a private home study is less of an assessment and more of a talk through the issues because it is not seen as in the interests of either the social worker or the families paying for the assessment for them to be too stressful or too

⁵⁰ In 1990 voluntary adoption agency Childlink 'took its first tentative steps into the sphere of intercountry adoption' (Hesslegrave 2000). Other voluntary adoption agencies taking on ICA responsibility include PACT (Parents and Children Together), Doncaster Adoption and Family Welfare Society Ltd, Norwood Ravenswood (formerly Norwood Jewish Adoption Society, Nugent Care Society) and SSAFA Forces Help Soldiers, Sailors and Airman's Families Association) – none of the families in this sample used any of these organisations.

⁵¹ Implemented 31 January 2000.

stringent. The work of one independent social worker was uncovered as being wholly inadequate by Robin Cook in his investigation about adoption from Guatemala (Cook Report 1996) where the social worker was found to have not followed-up any of the prospective adopters references and had written his report before police clearance had been given. This is not to imply that all independent social workers are like this but there are problems of regulation and who monitors their work and their assessments.

If a family intend to adopt from overseas using a local authority Home Study Assessment most will be charged which would not be the case if they were to adopt domestically, and these charges vary considerably from local authority to local authority, which was seen as unacceptable by some families:

"I think if one authority charges five thousand I think that should be a country wide thing. It's not fair if you live in one area you have to pay or you even can't have one done and others it's just, 'yeah we will come and do it for you'. It would be ideal if it were all free and it was all free help but when you want to do that you are prepared to pay aren't you? But it has to be within people's limits" (16)

One factor, which may influence the attitudes of individual social workers, is whether they have an interest in or knowledge of intercountry adoption. Allocation of workloads within social services departments may also be a reason. If social workers feel they are being taken away from work with families for whom they have a statutory obligation to support an additional obligation to carry out Home Study Assessments for families wanting to adopt from overseas may not be seen as a priority. Many local authority adoption social workers view finding homes for children in their care as a far higher priority than assessing couples who wish to adopt from abroad. In addition they have developed systems and structures for handling domestic adoptions where adoption is viewed as a 'service for children' unlike intercountry adoption which is often perceived as being primarily meeting the needs of parents (Masson 2000 p221). The situation today

may feel even more pressured for social workers since the government announced its intention to introduce adoption targets.⁵²

Alternative models of providing and financing Home Study Assessments for intercountry adoptions can be found in Scandinavia and the USA. Costs of adopting overseas in the USA can vary considerably from ten thousand dollars to thirty thousand dollars with differences mainly depending on which lawyer the adopters use (Gailey 2000). At the Mine-Yours-Ours and Theirs conference Oslo 1999, Gailey also gave an example of applying for a Home Study Assessment in which the social worker offered to do it over the phone. If the applicant was prepared to spend some time giving the social worker the information they needed they would then write a report for them based on this information. In the Netherlands and Scandinavia home study reports are the responsibility of local authorities (as in the UK) but (unlike the UK) are free of charge (Selman 1998). In the Netherlands prospective adopters attend compulsory preparation courses as the first stage of the adoption process and these courses cost about three hundred pounds but the subsequent Home Study Assessment is free (Duinkerken and Geerts 2000). In the UK it has been argued that charges to parents wishing to adopt overseas is legitimate because it is 'buying' the time of social workers whose first responsibility is to the children in their care. It also allows local authorities to contract out the work to social workers from other local authorities if they need to. The above examples from Scandinavia suggest this does not have to be the case. A presentation at a NICA meeting in January 2000 by one of the members suggested that all adoption applications (domestic and overseas) should be treated in the same way after an adoption application has been received (Meanwell 2000). It would only be after attending preparation courses and having been successful in the Home Study Assessment that discussions would move on to the type of adoption the adopters felt was best for them (domestic or overseas). In this way it was suggested adopters would be able to make better informed-choices made with the support of social workers.

⁵² Increase numbers of adoptions by forty percent by the year 2004-2005 (DoH 2000).

4.3.2 Families' experiences of Home Study Assessments

One family adopting from Sri Lanka (28) experienced having a Home Study Assessment done by an independent social worker and a second one done by the local authority.⁵³ The family felt there were big differences in the way the local authority Home Study Assessment was carried out compared with their first one done by an independent social worker. According to the interviewees, the local authority Home Study Assessment was expensive, inaccurate and appointments were cancelled at the last minute, which was a contributing factor to it taking a whole year to complete (started in Sep 1994 and completed in Jan 1996). All of this resulted in their relationship with the social worker not being very good and often resulted in a tense atmosphere during their assessment sessions.

All the families adopting from China (mid 1990s to late 1990s), had local authority Home Study Assessments and, on the whole they were less critical about the process. The families each experienced delays before the assessment could be started with additional delays occurring because the final report had to be presented to an adoption panel for their approval before the paperwork could go through to the next stage. This additional adoption panel stage causes further delays in the process which earlier adopters did not experience. When private Home Study Assessments were allowed the assessments were done and reports written and forwarded, along with all the other documentation immediately without going before an adoption panel.

One of the main problems reported by families adopting from China was that none of the social workers carrying out these assessments had any experience of overseas adoption and were all found to be of little practical help to the families during this stage of the

⁵³ They had a second assessment by the local authority because, at the time of interview, they were in the process of adopting for a second time.

adoption process. However, none of the social workers were uncooperative or critical about the family's wishes to adopt a child from abroad and at least two local authorities acknowledged that they either had no staff available, because of their volume of work, or no one experienced to do this type of work so they contracted-out to independent social workers working for other Social Services departments. As overall numbers of families adopting children from overseas is still quite small in the UK (Brennan 2000, Selman 2002) many social workers have no experience of intercountry adoption. They may be unsure about procedures in the different countries and find it impossible to advise parents about the various stages and they may be unsure about special issues, which need to be addressed for adoption of children from overseas. Therefore a major problem is seen as the inexperience of social workers. All but one of the families in the study, adopting from China, lived in the North East of England and with regional variations in the numbers of overseas adoptions this may be more of a problem for some local authorities than for others i.e. those in the north having less experience than those in local authorities in the south.

Despite the majority of the families adopting from China not being too critical of their experiences of the Home Study Assessment, the first interviewee did express concern and described the process as being the 'worst thing ever in her life' and 'very intrusive'. She complained that it took months to complete with some home visits lasting up to three hours and several members of her family being interviewed as well as her two referees. One aspect that the adopter found worrying was that one-day the social worker turned up, unannounced at her work place, which seemed to this respondent to be inappropriate.

It does appear, therefore, that the attitude of individual workers and the relationships, which develop between client and worker, can make all the difference as to how families experience the assessment. One of the mothers who had adopted from Sri Lanka and some years later from China, developed a good working relationship with her social worker and explained:

"She was lovely. She wasn't at all patronising. Because I was quite worried about how I would feel about a social worker coming into my house. She was excellent and was very supportive." (02)

Not only does the attitude of individual workers make a difference but the attitudes of families themselves. What one person forwards as a criticism of the system another can make into a positive aspect of the experience. As mentioned, the main criticism made by many families was about the lack of experience their social workers had of intercountry adoption, which meant they did not get the support and guidance they expected from professionals. However, at least one family viewed this in a constructive way:

"They came and she was very thorough, she made us think about what we were doing. One of the things she said was that she didn't know anything about adoption from China. I think one of the things that was important was to demonstrate to your social worker that you had done your homework before you got them along." (03)

Home Study Assessments as part of the re-adoption process

Families who have not adopted from a designated country on arrival in the UK adoptive parents must inform their local authority of their intention to adopt, and apply for a British adoption order. Once this notice has been given the child becomes protected under the 1976 Adoption Act and the local authority has statutory duties to perform.⁵⁴ By the time an adoption application has reached the UK courts the result, it could be suggested, is more or less a foregone conclusion. However, this does not mean that families do not suffer undue distress and pressure and for many it is felt to be 'a waste of resources':

"I think it is a waste of resources. I think that the reason you go through that is because the adoptions in Guatemala aren't recognised. The problem is they are not really assessing us as parents because why should they assess us as parents and not parents of children adopted from China. We have all been through the same process, so the only difference is the legality of the process and they need to verify that which they could do that much faster. There is no reason whatsoever why it should be a year." (15)

⁵⁴ After the passing of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 the UK has now been able to ratify the Hague Convention in June 2003. This means that for adoptions from countries that have also ratified ('convention adoptions'), the children will not have to be re-adopted on their return to the UK.

As far as many parents are concerned the children are now legally theirs, because they have been adopted in the courts of the child's birth country and it is only because these procedures are not acknowledged in the UK that the child has to be adopted for a second time in the British courts. It is a year in which families have continued social work contact/intervention, which for many is resented.

The families adopting from the Latin American countries, the Philippines and Eastern Europe all had to apply to the courts in the UK to re-adopt. There were a range of experiences regarding the procedures in the UK but the majority had at some point found the experience irritating at the least and, for some intolerable. All the families adopting from Latin America had had private Home Study Assessment Reports done for the adoption in the country of origin and these had been unproblematic but it was at the stage of re-adoption which caused most frustration. In the majority of cases the parents had undergone long, drawn-out, and uncertain adoptions in the different countries of origin and then to encounter more obstacles on their return to Britain was not what they wanted to happen. They had their long awaited child and they wanted to get on living their lives, as a family not continued bureaucracy. However, not all families found the process in the UK problematic and there were parents who accepted there were procedures that had to be complied with and they felt that if they had a positive attitude things would work out. Despite this there was a continued sense of uncertainty and lack of control over the situation:

"You have got to be accepted by the social workers and by Social Services. So at this stage you are really trying to prove yourself and it's a horrible feeling because if you are refused by any of them that's it." (07)

The single mother who adopted from El Salvador (11) felt that the local authority Home Study Assessment, as part of the re-adoption process, was a matter of 'just going through the motions really'. She did not resent it but as far as she was concerned her daughter

was already her daughter and she 'found it a bit of a waste of time but I suppose they have to do it'.

Therefore, how families perceive the experience of adoption and re-adoption is dependent upon several factors. The attitude of the families and whether they have confidence about their abilities as parents, their rights to be a parent and the relationship which develops with the social worker doing their Home Study Assessment. One family adopting from Guatemala (07) appears to have had no problems. They had confidence about their suitability as parents having already raised four birth sons, plus their social worker was not ideologically apposed to ICA - both factors seem to have contributed to a positive experience:

"My social worker was fantastic. She was very interested in international adoption and her supervisor had already done a friend's assessment, had been her caseworker. So she came over here for a period of time to do the Home Study - which we actually enjoyed because she was very positive about things. We knew we were a good set of parents and so we had nothing to hide. We just had to give her as much information as she wanted." (07)

In contrast to this example of a positive experience, another family (26) seems to have encountered major problems with their re-adoption. Before travelling to Brazil they had a private Home Study Assessment Report done and the Brazilian courts accepted this but for the re-adoption in the UK a local authority Home Study Assessment had to be undertaken and this is where the main problems occurred. The system in both countries was slow and protracted but it was the UK system, which they felt most angry about. Upon returning to the UK they gained entry through immigration relatively easily, despite not having prior entry clearance, and did not encounter delays they were expecting. However, what the father called the ineptitude of the social worker still angered him at the time of the interview (some 6 years after the child was brought to the UK) and he felt very let down by the system. According to the father the social worker did not appear to know what was expected of him and delayed and delayed writing the final report. The father gave the example of how the family had not heard from the social worker for several weeks and phoned his office to find out about what was

happening and whether they had a date for their case to be presented to the adoption panel. They were duly informed that the social worker had taken extended leave and was not expected back for another month. The main problem for the family was that they had only been given a six-month entry visa for their child and this was expiring. The visa had to be renewed at least twice before the courts processed the adoption. They felt frustration and anger at how they were being treated by their local social services department. It was at this point that they were reminded of their experiences in Brazil and how informal networks played a major part in 'getting things moving' they decided to try this out in the UK, and so, the father described how he:

"... rang up everyone I knew and just tried to find some way through it. I rang up people who I know had adopted, people from AFAA. I rang up someone whose uncle was in the House of Lords and in the end I rang up our MP who happened to be a solicitor, and explained the situation." (26)

4.3.3 Managing the assessment process

It is quite clear from the above accounts that several families found the Home Study Assessment daunting and full of anxiety. Not only were they all worried about the outcome of the assessment, those having local authority Home Study Assessments found that the social worker's lack of knowledge and experience about intercountry adoption made the situation worse. Therefore, there is a situation where all parties have to manage a situation in which the social workers are unsure of their role and parents are overly concerned about the outcome of the assessment. The parents are concerned regarding the management of information about themselves, being worried about how much of themselves they feel comfortable revealing or in fact how much of themselves are they prepared to reveal.

According to Manning's, 1992 interpretation of Goffman's work there is a distinction to be made between expressive and instrumental behaviours and I suggest this is what prospective parents are doing during the Home Study interviews. They are having to decide how much of themselves they are prepared to reveal and how much of their

actions are instrumental i.e. a means to an end – tell the social worker what you think they want or need to hear. Use of Goffman's work to interpret this type of situation does seem to suggest that individuals try to be cynical manipulators of situations. It is clear that during the Home Study Assessment period parents have to balance the potential gains (of becoming a parents) and dealing with the consequences of failing to achieve a positive final report. They can find themselves in situations where they are asked to address issues, which they would prefer not to address and which gives the parents feelings of helplessness and issues of power and control become critical. The risk of being turned down is forever in their minds. During these assessments parents may experience feelings of fear, resentment, anger and distrust (Simmonds and Haworth 2000).

A major problem for prospective parents during the Home Study interviews is that the situation is new, expectations are unclear and the families are not used to being investigated, some would say 'interrogated', by Local Authority Social Services Department social workers. The situation for the social workers is little better. Neither are they used to interviewing middle class, well-educated people, as their clientele are generally people in need of social worker support. However, the work of social workers does often entail confrontation with their clients. Many clients of social services welcome support of social workers but equal numbers resent the intrusion and questioning of their ability to manage their own lives.

Goffman (1969) suggests that attempts at controlling situations are all part of a performance during which individuals implicitly expect those taking part to take seriously the impression being given and possibly more importantly believe the performance is a true representation of themselves. This however, is where problems and tensions begin. Contrary to what many prospective adopters may think social workers are not there looking for perfect, never erring families. In their work they are fully aware that 'we are all human' and all family dynamics are different. However, periodically there are stories in the press which suggest couples have been rejected as adopters

because they are overweight or because they are smokers, whether true or not, they make some prospective adopters over cautious and unsure about what is expected of them. But what is it they are looking for? What is it that will make them decide the person before them will make a good 'mum' or 'dad' for a child?

Parents feel a need to manage such situations but are concerned that impressions fostered by a performance are delicate, fragile and can be shattered by very minor mishaps. Prospective adopters feel they have so much to lose if the impression they give is not the very best at all times. However, in most assessment situations what usually happens is a 'working consensus' is found where both parties are equally aware of how each is trying to manage the situation and each shows reciprocal respect and concern for each other.

A major problem, suggested by Ryburn (1991), is that much of the assessment done by social workers assumes an objective reality which is far removed from the truth when what makes a good parent is subjective not an objective, measurable condition and it is this tension which causes misunderstanding and uncertainty. It is with the aim of addressing these issues that a standardised framework of assessment is needed. Details of one such system of standardisation has been implemented by the Irish government, details of which are available in Simmonds and Haworth (2000) but others methods and issues are worth consideration, one of which is power inequalities in the assessment situation.

Selwyn (1991, 1994) suggests that the power of social workers is often dismissed and not sufficiently taken into account so that families can be left feeling they do not have the right to disagree with tasks requested of them or to challenge the content of the final report - if they are shown the final report, which is not always the case. Social workers do have the power to grant or deny the applicants the right to progress through the system which cannot help but leave prospective adopters feeling very dependent on the social workers. In their discussion of power relationships between social workers and

prospective adopters Simmonds and Haworth (2000), acknowledge there is an imbalance but they suggest this is not with individual social workers, who themselves are working within a system which has limited resources and competing priorities which in reality gives them only marginal power in their day to day working lives. In addition they note that the culture of social work emphasises 'partnership, co-operation, support and understanding' but acknowledge there is no foolproof way of ensuring this is what happens or is perceived as happening by prospective adopters.

One way forward is for the applicants to be more fully engaged in the assessment. The idea of prospective adopters taking a fuller part in the process of adoption was the main aim of a pilot project in central Scotland in which a new model has been tested. The pilot was set up and influenced by comments and criticisms from past adopters about their experiences of completing a Home Study Assessment done within a traditional investigative/individual model. The main aim of the new model was to gradually shift power away from social workers towards the prospective adopters. The way in which this was to be done was via the method of assessment itself. The foundation of the assessment was to continue to be the BAAF Form F but rather than the social workers 'doing' the assessment on the prospective adopters, the adopters themselves evaluated their own strengths and weaknesses as future parents. During the assessment they have an allocated key worker who supports and guides them through the whole process. This model eliminates the need for attendance at a preparation class as much of the work is done within the self-assessment group. The project was evaluated by Clark et al (1998) who found that all participants were enthusiastic about this method of assessment. Prospective adopters found the experience had made a positive contribution to their lives and boosted their confidence as future parents.

Preparation groups for prospective adopters

The mention of preparation groups raises the issue about the desirability and need for such courses. Looking overseas to a country with a thirty-year history of intercountry

adoption, in the Netherlands attendance at preparation meetings is compulsory and is undertaken before commencement of a Home Study Assessment. Prospective adopters have to submit an application to the Dutch Central Authority of their intention to adopt from overseas when their personal details are then forwarded to Bureau VIA (Organisation for Information on Inter-country Adoption) who provide a programme of information about overseas adoption (Duinkerken and Geerts 2000). The aim of these courses is to ensure that all prospective adopters are able to make a well-considered choice about whether they wish to proceed. None of the parents in this research had attended preparation classes prior to adoption but it is often considered to be beneficial if such courses are available with a requirement to attend. In a recent survey of Scottish adopters Selman and Mason (2003) found that those who had attended preparation courses valued the opportunity of meeting other adoptive parents and the discussion about specific issues concerning adoption from overseas. However, there were a number of negative issues which were raised by the parents some of which involved the practicality of timing, location and uncertainty about whether the meetings were to be held or not, but in addition to this there was the problem that the focus of the group was not always intercountry adoption but rather adoption in general. This last issue is of fundamental importance in the UK when thinking about the practicalities of making such courses compulsory. If intercountry adoption continues to be on the relatively small scale that it is today and has been throughout the 1990s, will it be possible to offer all prospective adopters a preparation course which does not involve them travelling considerable distances to join together with parents from other parts of their region or even different parts of the country?

4.4 Procedures in the Sending Countries

Each sending country has complex laws and procedures with their own rules and regulations that make ICA extremely complicated and information about correct

procedures are not always readily available or easy to comply with⁵⁵. Countries vary in the importance they place on the age, religion, marital status and income of prospective adopters. Some countries set both upper and lower age limits, some restrict adoption to childless couples and others have residence rules. Therefore, adopters may have to stay quite some time in the sending country to complete the official documentation and/or adoption through the local courts before they are allowed bring the child back to the UK with them. The process in all countries is lengthy and expensive and requires a considerable degree of work and perseverance on the part of adoptive parents. Therefore, it is necessary for prospective adopters to obtain as much information as they can as early as they can in the process to give themselves a realistic idea of the complexity of the process.

In some cases documentation requirements are not easy to achieve. For example the obtaining of police clearance is not a straightforward process in this country. Unfortunately there is no clear procedure for this obtaining police clearance with variations between authorities as to how to proceed. It is also unclear as to whether local LASSDs can pass on to the parents the police clearance they obtain as part of the Home Study Assessment or whether it is confidential and for their records only.

The process could be described as ‘a paper chase’ with all documents passing between government departments in both countries and, in many instances there was a duplication of many documents and added to this was the complication of language differences. All documents have to be notarised before being passed to the sending countries and the amount of paperwork and documents which have to be collected, and in some cases duplicated is massive.

⁵⁵ Information and individual fact sheets are now available via the DoH website www.doh.gov.uk but were not available at the time of the adoptions in this study.

It is not only knowing what documents are needed and eligibility criteria but also who will make the links with the country that is a problem. The accounts below illustrate some of the problems families face when trying to find agents and intermediaries to work on their behalf in the sending countries and will tell of their experiences in the sending countries.

4.4.1 The Chinese experience

The system of adopting from China is well documented⁵⁶ and families know what is expected of them at all stages of the process in China. They know how long they are expected to stay in the country, how much money they need as a 'gift' for the Chinese authorities, that they are expected to do a certain amount of sightseeing and they will be given details about interpreters who will support them during their stay in China. However, one of the mothers told about how she found out that in the official letter written to the Chinese authorities requesting permission to adopt one of their children the request must only ask to adopt 'a child'; parents must not request a girl despite it being almost certain that they will get a girl. This type of detail is not written into official guidelines so parents continue to be dependent upon each other for information:

"..... you haven't got to say 'girl' because it's not supposed to be a well known fact that it's just girls. You have to put down, even though you know you are going to get a girl, you have to put down you want to adopt a child." (09)

Generally the system works well and families are not encouraged to deviate from what is expected of them but what many do experience is that when they arrive in China, the children are handed over to them soon after their arrival despite having been told that this would happen towards the end of their two week stay in the country. This is therefore an unexpected shock but a joy to most parents who are then able to spend time with the children in China with little else to do but care for the child and becoming parents. One

⁵⁶ Detailed information is available from fact sheets produced by the Dfes and OAH available via their websites.

parent also had the unfortunate experience of having the details and a photograph of a child sent to her and then two weeks later receiving a letter to say the child had been offered to someone else and new details of a different child were enclosed. Therefore, the 'system' like all systems is not foolproof and does not always work as expected and parents talked about the uncertainty that they felt during the process and the delays at each stage which they found particularly difficult:

"It's dreadful because every day you think it's going to be today, it's going to be today. It drives you crazy." (01)

"We actually used an interpreter because of the pressure of waiting. You just never knew what was happening. Things would be better if they had a better system in place whereby they explained to you how the papers were sent to China. The fact they weren't acknowledging things like this made it difficult. You are told your papers have gone to China, but you don't know if they have got there. It is the fact that you hear absolutely nothing, nothing at all. It was one of the other mothers who found out how they [the papers] got there." (06)

4.4.2 The Sri Lankan experience

However, procedures in other countries are less easy to find out about and have more potential for individual deviations and interpretations. As a means of facilitating adoption in Sri Lanka a number of families in this study group used the services of what they referred to as a 'Dutch Agency' as an intermediary. The 'agency' was in fact a Dutch lawyer who organised contacts i.e. lawyers, in Sri Lanka and informed the families about what documentation they would need. However, details about this agency were somewhat meagre:

"We went through what was described as a Dutch charitable agency which appeared to be one guy operating with an individual lawyer." (14)

One family (28) explained that they were doubtful about the working practices of this Dutch agency. They went to Sri Lanka and tried to make contact with the lawyer recommended by the 'agency' but were disconcerted to find the lawyer had, very recently, been brought before the courts and charged with illegalities arising from

adoption cases he was handling. The agency in Holland denied knowledge about any malpractice in Sri Lanka and was unsupportive of the family when they raised doubts about what was happening. The family related how, not only was the lawyer brought before the courts (charges were dropped at the last minute), but also there were a number of articles in newspapers about the case. All charges and allegations of unlawful activity were strongly refuted by their only contact in Sri Lanka at this time, their driver who was acting as the lawyer's representative. However, despite the charges being dropped the family were unhappy about continuing with the adoption using this lawyer and decided to find themselves another one. This was not easy and they explained that at times they felt they were being hindered because other people were wary of taking a case from the original lawyer. However, eventually they employed the services of a semi-retired lawyer who agreed to take on their case as a favour to the orphanage worker who was managing the child placement element of the adoption. The lawyer explained to the family that he was extremely perturbed about the levels of corruption he had encountered and was, at all times keen to emphasise that where he was concerned no bribes would take place. This lawyer also felt the need to get the case transferred to a court that was run by a judge who he knew to be honest and did not take bribes. On the whole, for this family, the adoption experience in Sri Lanka entailed an endless round of troubles at all stages of the process. Even after the child had been officially adopted and they went to get a passport, so the child could travel back to the UK, they encountered obstructions, which they felt was all part of the problems about them not continuing with the original lawyer. However, at the same time they were ready to acknowledge that they themselves may have started to become paranoid and that in fact what they were encountering was just poorly co-ordinated systems run by personnel who were inadequately trained for the job.

Another family (02) had problems adopting from Sri Lanka but in this case there was no suggestion that the problems were in any way suspect, rather it was a matter of being very unlucky. However, their case does illustrate how the process can be fraught with difficulties and uncertainty. The family were allocated a child, a boy, and their adoption application was presented before the court in Sri Lanka but the judge was unhappy about

the adoption of the boy because the couple already had three sons. He felt the adoptee's position within the family would be tenuous and he preferred that they adopt a girl instead. The family had been in Sri Lanka for almost four weeks⁵⁷ and were unaware that there was any potential for dismissal by the courts. They had not requested a boy but had been allocated a boy by their contacts (a lawyer) in Sri Lanka who they trusted knew what may or may not be an issue with the courts. Consequently they were left with no option but to return home to the UK and wait until a baby girl became available. This decision by the judge caused considerable financial hardship for this family because they were one of the less wealthy intercountry adopters. They had raised the funds needed for the first adoption by re-mortgaging their house and to return to Sri Lanka for a second adoption they had to sell the family car and the husband got a second job working in the evenings. On their return to Sri Lanka for the second adoption they found the lawyer had 'had a word with the judge' who allowed the case to appear before the court sooner than it would normally have done. They were there for only a week on this visit. However, there were still unforeseen problems. When they applied to the British Embassy for Entry Clearance back in to the UK doubts were raised as to whether the woman who had appeared at the court hearing was in fact the true birth mother. The outcome of this was the child was not allowed to leave the country until there was absolute proof that the baby had been voluntarily relinquished for adoption. Therefore, the birth mother had to give a blood sample that was then sent to London for testing. There was no guarantee how long this would take and of course, no certainty about the results. The adopters made the decision to return to England themselves leaving the infant in the care of foster carers which they paid for. It was ten weeks before the results came through and they got the all clear to return to Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, on their return to Sri Lanka the adopters found that the condition of the infant had deteriorated because the foster family had not taken very good care of their charge.

⁵⁷ A period of four weeks residency in Sri Lanka is a requirement - this differs from country to country.

4.4.3 The Latin American experience

Families adopting from the Latin American countries included in this sample group told revealing stories about their experiences adopting in the birth country. The experiences from each of the six countries differed in almost every aspect - starting with who the point of contact was in the country, how the children were identified as available for adoption, the length of time adopters were expected to stay in the country and many other small details some of which will be given in the accounts below.

Two contrasting experiences of the adoption process come from the family adopting from Chile (19) and a single mother adopting from El Salvador (11). The El Salvadorian adoption was quick, simple and straightforward whereas the Chilean adoption was a long drawn out process, which took a total of three years to complete. With this adoption there were delays and false starts in both the UK and Chile. The family were allocated a child who was only a tiny baby and were invited to actually give the baby a name but before the adoption hearing came to court there were political problems in Chile that resulted in the courts being closed for more than eighteen months. An additional problematic aspect of the court delays during this adoption was the impact it was having on, not only the adoptive parents but also the birth mother. The need for the birth mother to attend court each time the case was presented before the court caused considerable distress to the birth mother who lived in a village quite some distance from the court in the capital. The birth mother was at that time living back in the family home but had not told them about the child she had given birth to and relinquished for adoption.

The single mother adopting from El Salvador told several of her friends that she intended to adopt from overseas whereupon a number came up with various suggestions to how she could go about it. The initial suggestion, which most appealed was what she described as a 'dedicated' adoption, probably in the USA, which is an adoption agreed with the birth mother before the baby is born. The prospective adopter becomes involved at a very early stage arranging and paying for the birth mother's medical care during the pregnancy. However, before such an adoption arrangement was made another friend

came back from El Salvador having adopted a baby from there and had contact numbers and addresses which she thought she should give a try. The speed of the process for this adoption was quite incredible and a contrast to the experiences of the majority of the other parents adopting from all the different countries. The lawyer in El Salvador was not contacted until the beginning of the month, a child was born later that same month and was offered to the adopter and the following month she travelled to collect and adopt the child. So in total from the point of seriously thinking about adoption and making enquiries to the adoption in El Salvador took a total of four months.

A major characteristic of the two adoptions from Brazil seems to have been the use of informal networks and being reliant upon people they know or friends who know people with links to Brazil. Similar accounts in Humphrey and Humphrey (1993) from the three families adopting from Brazil suggest that this was how they too had to manage their adoptions. One family (25) had initially intended to adopt from Romania and applied to have a Home Study Assessment done by their local authority. However, during the time it was taking to get the assessment completed a colleague, who was Brazilian, heard they were wanting to adopt a child from overseas and suggested that the next time they returned to Brazil to visit their family the couple go with them, take their paperwork, and they would get them introduced to the judge at the local court. This is exactly what they decided to do and on their first visit they spent four and a half months over there. They found a child, a baby girl, in an orphanage in Salvador, the old capital of Brazil. She was extremely underweight and not thriving. During her four and a half month stay the adoptive mother was caring for this baby girl. This procedure differs from country to country and in some countries the child cannot be handed over to the prospective adopters until the courts have passed the adoption application. With the Chilean adoption, mentioned above, although the family had been identified as the prospective parents they could not become legal guardians of the child until the case had come before the courts.

When the family returned to Brazil to adopt a second child, they made the decision not to use the same lawyer because although they were reasonably happy with the way things had been handled the first time around they were concerned about how long the whole process had taken. Now they had a young child with them and they did not feel it was fair on anyone to spend a second extended period in Brazil. They were able via existing contacts to find a lawyer in another city who was willing to help them with the second adoption. This adoption only took a total of twenty-one days because the family described how they 'broke every rule in the book'. To begin with the family refused to have a second Home Study Assessment done in the UK because their previous one which they had had done for the first adoption was still valid for use in the Brazilian courts and they were not prepared to pay another several thousand pounds for a second one. Also, from their previous experience they were aware that the courts in Brazil were more concerned as to whether children were being adopted for spare body parts to be sold at a later date, whether the children have access to the National Health Service and would they be allowed to have a British passport. Fonseca (2002) wrote about a judge in Recife (Brazil) who suspended all overseas adoptions in his court in 1994 because of his concerns about children being used for organ transplants. Access to services such as the NHS, are taken for granted in the UK and the idea of adopting a child to use to sell for body parts seem too extreme, but these were the type of questions the family had been asked.⁵⁸

The second family who adopted from Brazil (26) also made extensive use of colleagues and acquaintances. A business acquaintance from some years ago volunteered to contact contemporaries back in Brazil and asked if they knew about any babies available for adoption. Soon afterwards they received a phone call about a young pregnant mother who wanted to have her baby adopted. The family flew out to Brazil accompanied by their friend, his Brazilian wife and the friend's son. At this point they did not meet the

⁵⁸ Stories about abuse of children continue - The Guardian (2003) - with reports of child trafficking and the sale of children 'dead or alive' concluding 'that the missing children die or are killed for their organs' (30th September 2003).

birth mother but waited for word from their contact to tell them when the baby had been born. After a two or three week wait they were told that the mother had given birth, however, the doctor had decided to adopt the baby himself. What was explained to the couple was that:

“The girl was white and the father was the son of a good family and was also white. The baby was white, ‘well-born’ and valuable and that was why the doctor wanted it. The doctor wasn’t going to adopt it. The doctor had bought it and the child will end up in America because he had contacts with people who want to adopt from America and he will in effect sell it. This is what happens. So after being there for two weeks we now had nothing and we had nowhere to go.” (26)

Another couple of weeks after this adoption had fallen through their contact in Brazil received a phone call from a different doctor about a woman who was coming to his clinic, who was eight months pregnant, already had a child and could not afford a second one. They were invited to attend the clinic to meet the woman:

“We went to his clinic the day she was to attend her antenatal class and met her and her son and the doctor. We took along another friend as a translator.” (26)

The young woman’s circumstances were not uncommon. She was single, had a child from a previous relationship, and was employed as a live-in maid. Many employers will accept and employ a woman with a child but are not prepared to provide living accommodation which is suitable for a mother with two children. Therefore, in this situation the woman is likely to find herself with no job and nowhere to live.

When the couple met the birth mother they got to know the full circumstances of why she felt she had to relinquish her child for adoption. At the time of meeting her i.e. when she was eight months pregnant she was technically homeless. She had been employed as a live-in maid to support herself and her son but her situation had become difficult when her employer asked her to marry him and when she refused he told her she would have to leave his employment. This, of course meant she had become homeless and was eight months pregnant:

“We talked to her about it and asked her all sorts of questions like, ‘are you sure you want to give up your child?’ ‘How do you feel about it being abroad and going to a different country?’ and things like that. You know she had no choice so it’s all rather pointless. What could she say? She had no choice. But she was very practical about it. So we agreed she was to come and live with us. She’d live in the room next to us with her son until the baby was born and we’d pay for everything. We would take the child once it was born and then we undertook to find her somewhere to live afterwards.” (26)

The family were aware that they had to be extremely careful about what payments were made to the birth mother because if there was any suggestion that the birth mother had been paid to relinquish her child this would cause extreme difficulties in the UK. During the interview the father inferred that as far as individuals in Brazil are concerned it is not important if payments are made to the birth mother. However, the need to take care about how adopters conducted themselves during the adoption was further highlighted with the story about the day the family collected the baby from the hospital:

“On the Monday morning we went along to the clinic in two cars. My wife and I in one car and our friend and her daughter in the other. We parked at opposite ends of the street. It was strange sort of, like a spy exchange. Our friend and her daughter went into the clinic to fetch the mother (birth). Our friend got the mother and her daughter brought the baby out of the clinic. The mother went to one car and the baby to us in the other car and then we drove separately back to the house and the mother never saw the baby after that. And in fact we were told that she never did see the child. She wouldn’t feed the baby and didn’t see it. She came back to the house with us to begin with and lived in the servant’s quarters across the courtyard. “ (26)

A rather dubious piece of advice given to the family by the local priest was that they should register the child as their own because this was not only possible but would make the whole process quicker and simpler. The reasoning behind his advice was that:

“What is the greater good? The greater good is that you are giving the child a home. All the bureaucracy is getting in the way. You have to look at the ends and use the means to the better ends.” (26)

It was also suggested that there were members of staff at the British Embassy who would accept the wife had been pregnant upon arrival in Brazil and had given birth during their

time there. The family would then go along to the Embassy with the birth certificate and get a British passport. However, the adopters were not comfortable with the idea of doing this because they did not want, any time in the future, to be confronted with charges of having done something illegal. Added to this was the fact that the child was considerably darker skinned than either of the adoptive parents and they felt he did not look as if he could have been their birth child. It was important to the family that the adoption was legal:

"We wanted to do it absolutely legally so no one could come along and say 'he's not really yours'." (26)

They did not take the advice of the priest about registering the child as their own, but did take up his offer of finding the birth mother work and somewhere to live. The priest knew of a project, which provided jobs and accommodation for pregnant women who were unable to provide for themselves and their children. Many of the children were then placed for adoption and the women moved out of the project. In this particular instance they were prepared to take in the birth mother despite her already having relinquished her child. The adoptive parents went to visit her a few times whilst the adoption was being completed in Brazil but commented how she was always very surprised to see them and at times appeared a little irritated that they were continuing with the contact.

The father went on to note the problems of bureaucracy and difficulties in finding their way through the adoption system. When adopting from overseas language is a major obstacle and it is not only a matter of literal translation but of interpretation. A literal translation may actually mean completely different things in different countries and as the father commented, 'just because the words are the same they may not have the same meaning to the people out there' (26). He therefore felt that the only way forward was to have someone who knew how the system worked. He also suggested that it was advantageous to know someone who worked in different government departments and possibly the best way to do this was to socialize and let as many people as he could know what he was trying to do. Their main friend and helper in Brazil was a political

journalist and was 'the brother of one of their friends who was a civil servant in one of the departments and helped to sharpen things through':

"Going to have lunch with them, going to have a drink. If you just ask, 'if you know anybody who knows anybody who's in the court' and things like that. They often replied, 'No, I don't know but I know someone. I'll ask my friend.' And they then ask and they'd come back and say, 'I've got an aunt' and it was really as tenuous as that. And then we discovered our friend's sister knew somebody who was a friend of a woman who used to be the mistress of this judge who we went through. So we sort of followed this through and eventually we managed to get to talk to this particular judge." (26)

All these links and contacts were, as suggested by the interviewee, 'very tenuous' but at no time did money or promises of payments of any kind take place. Therefore, there were no guarantees, or actually any proof, that these contacts were in fact influencing the process at all but the interviewee did feel this was the only way to proceed. An example was given of how the friend stood outside an official's office door and every time someone went in or out he asked to be seen. The official insisted he was busy but after some time he eventually gave in and promised to sign the papers. It is knowing that this kind of behaviour works and knowing the system that is important and this parent felt that without the support of their Brazilian friends they would never have been able to complete the adoption or, at the very least, it would have taken considerably longer:

"If you just followed the legal process where you give in your application to a department and someone looks at it, stamps it and moves it on it would be there for a year." (26)

It might have been expected that these two families would have encountered more problems than they did because during the period that they were adopting (1991-1993) the numbers of overseas adoptions from Brazil were falling and Fonseca (2002) explained that from the late 1980s there had been a number of scandals about 'trafficking of children' and in 1988 the Brazilian Congress commissioned a parliamentary inquest into this problem. She gives one example of the state of Paraiba where, in 1991, the police began investigating judges, lawyers and clerks involved in intercountry adoption, a consequence of which was the following year saw a fall in the number of overseas

adoptions from three hundred a year to just three. One outcome of this was that many 'respectable' intermediaries would no longer get involved in overseas adoptions. However, another response was that overseas adoptions 'migrated' from the more regulated areas of Brazil to provincial areas which were less well regulated (p35).

Whom prospective adopters choose to work on their behalf or to guide them through the process in the sending country is apparently a problem and adopters can easily find themselves innocently using lawyers or other intermediaries who are not keeping within the bounds of the law. However, since these adoptions Brazil has ratified the 1993 Hague Convention (in March 1999)⁵⁹ and should now have a Central Authority who will be responsible for overseeing and processing all intercountry adoptions. This does not overcome the problem for parents when they are trying to make links with their chosen country, intermediaries or when they are choosing a child available for adoption. This 'matching' of child with adopter is a major problem in overseas adoptions. How do families get to know about infants being available for adoption in countries on the other side of the world? There are those who use independent/private adoption agencies based in the sending countries and there are those who have direct contact with lawyers who specialise in ICA. One family gave details about how the American agency they used (VIDA) learns about which children are available for adoption and suggested VIDA 'get their babies in various ways'. However, the most common method used by VIDA was a lawyer in Guatemala. This lawyer had become involved in international adoption when one of his maids got pregnant with twins. Already having five children she was unable to support any more children and wanted to have them adopted. The lawyer, who knew of VIDA's involvement in ICA contacted them and asked whether they were able to find families for the maids' babies. There is no doubt that there is money to be made by lawyers working in the field of ICA and adoptive families are aware of this:

⁵⁹ See Appendix F: Ratification of the 1993 Hague Convention to see the dates when other countries in the study ratified - or whether they have ratified.

“Our lawyer was very modest with an ordinary house, scratched car. He hadn’t made a fortune from adoptions. Hopefully he never will and is doing it for the right reasons. He and his wife were marvellous and they did more than was necessary. They took us to Antigua for a day and we had lunch with them. The wife came and saw us twice in the hotel. She wanted to take us sightseeing but was quite shocked because we had just went ourselves because it’s a bit dangerous over there. She bought our daughter a dress and boots and she still faxes me now and again.” (07)

The uncertainty about the legality of the process as experienced by some of the above mentioned families would support arguments in favour of using mediating agencies based in the UK. It has been suggested that there are a number of additional tasks which could be allocated to Local Authorities or accredited adoption agencies, including making links with agencies in sending countries and the matching of available children with approved adopters (Selman 1994, 1998). However, the system today continues to be one whereby parents are left to make their own contact with agencies or individuals in the sending country and in some case to actually identify children themselves.

4.5 Summary and Discussion

It is apparent that for many of the parents the process of adopting from overseas has been a difficult and at times frustrating experience in which they have had to display much determination and tenacity to complete. The history of intercountry adoption in the UK is not long and information is still not easy to obtain and procedures are still not always apparent. This was particularly the case for families who adopted pre 1991, before the rise in intercountry adoptions from Romania. However, it became apparent to the authorities in the UK that irregularities were occurring in many of the adoptions from Romania and closer scrutiny of all overseas adoptions has ensued. Since that time there have been improvements in the system in the UK with the Adoption and Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 (DoH 1999) and the Intercountry Adoption (Hague Convention) Regulations (DoH 2003b). There was also the government sponsored the

Overseas Adoption Helpline (OAH) that offered guidance and support for families who wished to adopt from overseas.⁶⁰ The families adopting from China were those who had the most clearly defined system to follow but even they found the process at times difficult to understand and to follow. Therefore, until there are clear and accessible guidelines there will always be adopters who do not follow the 'correct procedures'. For prospective adopters who have found themselves deviating from what might be considered proper procedures it has usually been the result of an inability to obtain advice and guidance from statutory bodies about what the correct procedures are.

An extreme example of how parents perceived their experience of the adoption process was given by the family who had adopted from Ecuador (29) who explained that they felt unsupported and at times came up against open hostility:

"In Britain we had no support from adoption agencies, our local council, immigration or guardian ad litem. We experienced open hostility, obstructive attitudes and procrastination from all. All the officials, except the judge at court, who was lovely, treated us as if we had done something wrong. We had to fight for two years and four months! We had to involve four social workers and we insisted the schedule two report was rewritten, we appeared on a BBC documentary about our adoption experiences and had to wait for a change of political party at our local authority. The whole process was a nightmare." (29)

However, this was one of the earlier adoptions when procedures were even less clear than they are today and before Local Authority Social Service Departments were obliged to undertake such work. Also, there was more overt ideological opposition at the time that this adoption took place as the findings in the IBA Report indicate (Mostyn and Bennett 1991) and as described by Selman (2000). The more recent adoptions, especially those from China, have not experienced similar opposition and have found local authority social workers more supportive, even if not knowledgeable about the process in different countries. In addition families adopting from China did seem to appreciate having a clearly defined procedure to follow despite it at times feeling to be 'over bureaucratic'.

⁶⁰ Funding has since been withdrawn by the government (1997) but OAH has been able to secure funding that has enabled it to continue as a registered charity.

However, the earlier adoptions in the study appear to have approached the adoption process as an 'adventure' in a similar way as those described by many of the parents in Humphrey and Humphrey (1993). It is unclear whether this sense of adventure was a way of coping with the lack of official policies and procedures or whether they are parents who like their independence and would prefer to set forth on an 'adventure' in preference to following official and monitored procedures.

When prospective adopters are adopting from overseas the process can be long and difficult because not only do they have to comply with procedures in the UK but also those in the sending country. The additional overseas element of the process⁶¹ entails working with agencies that can include local agencies in the sending country, private and statutory; agencies from neither the receiving or the sending country⁶² and finally private individuals, usually doctors or lawyers. In addition many sending countries have a lack of social work tradition and ideas around supporting families tend to be more concerned about control than about helping families overcome difficulties they may be experiencing (Ngabonziza 1991). One aspect of the delays in the UK that the adopters found difficult to tolerate were those at the Department of Health⁶³ which were often caused by understaffing problems. Despite the majority of families finding the procedures time consuming and fraught with difficulties, there were those who recognised that procedures cannot always be quick, easy and simple:

"Adoption is not going to be an easy option. It is going to be fraught; there will be problems, bureaucracy and red tape. But a lot depends on how determined you are to go through with it." (28)

The Home Study Assessment was the stage of the adoption process that the majority of families found most stressful and this may have been because they had never previously

⁶¹ Stages that include identifying a child, a lawyer or agency to facilitate the adoption and the court proceedings for the actual adoption.

⁶² Families in the study used a Dutch agency to facilitate adoptions in Sri Lanka and other families had the support of an agency from the USA (VIDA).

⁶³ Staff dealing with overseas adoption - now based in the Department of Education and Skills.

had their everyday lives scrutinised in this way. In this chapter there were examples of families who had private assessments and those who had local authority assessments. The use of private Home Study Assessments is now illegal and all such assessments have to be carried out by registered Voluntary Adoption Agencies or Local Authority Social Services Departments. Idealistically this may be preferable to a system where private Home Study Assessments are sometimes considered to have been 'bought' by prospective adopters. However, an issue raised by several parents was that of charging for Home Study Assessments, particularly those done by the local authority, when adopters who choose to adopt domestically have them done free of charge. The main criticism from parents was that the local authority social workers undertaking these assessments had little if any experience of intercountry adoption. They were seen as being unable to offer practical support about procedures in the sending countries and had little knowledge about the additional tasks that would have to be addressed by parents adopting a child from another country and another culture. If intercountry adoption continues on a small scale in the UK it is difficult to imagine there will be sufficient opportunities for social workers working within some Local Authority Social Services Departments to gain the necessary expertise needed to guide and support families through the overseas adoption process. In contrast private assessments undertaken by independent social workers with more experience of overseas adoption were seen as being more supportive, less challenging and more able to guide and advise about issues unique to intercountry adoption.

The UK is unusual in having no agency that works on behalf of parents adopting from overseas which assists them find a child in their chosen country. This is despite the notion of 'agency to agency' has been part of the ideology of the Hague Convention because adoptions facilitated in this way is seen as the best way of avoiding irregularities (van Loon 1990, ISS 2000). Currently there are six voluntary adoption agencies who offer intercountry adoption services but at the present time their work consists of offering preparation courses and undertaking Home Study Assessments but none are involved in mediation work with sending countries. It is uncertain which of these agencies would, in

the future, be interested in extending their work with overseas adopters but at least one, PACT has indicated they would. Whether they would extend their services to encompass mediation is unclear. However, within the new *Adoption and Children Act 2002* there is the means by which new agencies could be accredited to undertake a dedicated aspect of adoption. In the past agencies had to offer a full adoption service, domestic and intercountry adoption, but it would now be possible to have an agency which specialised in overseas adoption or more precisely specialised by choosing to offer mediation services only. The two voluntary adoption agencies with the best potential for offering such services would be OAH and OASIS because both have many informal links with agencies in other countries.⁶⁴

It would seem reasonable to suggest that allowing prospective adopters to go overseas to choose a child themselves without adequate guidance would fail to ensure that standards are the same as those of domestic adoption. If careful matching of children with parents is necessary for domestic adoptions why should it be different for children adopted from another country?

To ensure they correctly follow policies and procedures in their chosen country many families in this study have been reliant on a lawyer, or other similar third party, to act on their behalf, to mediate in the adoption. However, families adopting from China do not have direct communication with those responsible for facilitating the adoption and are dependent upon government bodies in both countries for processing their applications. In the majority of cases (but not those adopting from China) prospective adopters have not been encouraged to ask for detailed information from the birth family, the orphanage director, foster family or who ever had been caring for the child prior to the adoption.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ See chapter 10 for further discussion about the role of parent support groups and chapter 11 for policy discussion.

⁶⁵ The exceptions to this were the family adopting from the USA who were in contact with the birth mothers of both of their children during the pregnancies; the family adopting from Chile who was in direct contact with their daughters' foster carers; one of the adopters from Brazil who was also in direct contact with the birth mother towards the end of her pregnancy.

In many cases information about the child has been minimal⁶⁶. For the most part professionals working in the sending country have the best interests of the child at heart but this does not mean that they are able to adequately translate or interpret, without cultural differences influencing ideas about what is relevant or important for the parents to know about the child. With the aid of linking agencies a meaningful dialogue can take place and more information can be gathered and, importantly, retained for the future. Information, which may seem insignificant at the time of the adoption, may be significant at a later date, as the child reaches adolescence or adulthood.

It is apparent from the above account that there has been a wide range of experiences starting from the beginning of the process right through to completion of the adoption. The direction of future policy may be open for debate but it does seem that there has been a lack of standardisation in practice with few, if any guidelines for parents and professions to follow. After an examination of the interview data it could be asked, will increased regulation via legislation, be a means of improving the process for parents by making it easier for them to find their way through a complicated system? Will the changes in practice and legislation, be a means of empowering parents? Has there been a major ideological shift away from disapproval of intercountry adoption and is there now an acceptance that it is a valid route to parenthood?

By increasing regulation of intercountry adoption the government must be seen to be taking responsibility for the children and the parents by ensuring there are adequate support services, not only during the adoption process but after the adoption order has been passed and the child has come to live in the UK. The introduction of the Adoption Support Services (Local Authorities) (England) Regulations (DoH 2003) does indicate the government's acknowledgement of the need for improved support systems for adopters. However, at the present time there is uncertainty about whether these services

⁶⁶ See following chapters for discussion about telling children their adoption story – Chapter 5; and Chapter 6 & 7 about parents helping their children to learn more about the birth country and the birth family.

will extend to families adopting from overseas or whether Local Authorities will be able to prioritize services for children who have been adopted from the care system (in England and Wales). The main question raised is whether such changes in legislation meet the expectations or the needs of future parents who adopt from overseas? Will the legislation go far enough or will it become too restrictive and inhibit the sense of 'adventure' exhibited by many overseas adopters?

Introduction to Part Three

Origins: Biography and Heritage

The last chapter was about the process of adoption and the lengths to which the adopters had to go to become parents, to become a family with children. The process was long and full of uncertainty but once the process is over and the child is legally theirs a new set of 'post adoption' issues comes to the fore. This will be a time when parents may have to confront ideas about how they will manage parenting a child whose ethnic origin is different to their own and how their identity as a family will change. Once the children have come to live in the UK they will also have to deal with how they give the children a sense of belonging within the immediate family and the community but also allow the child to have a clear understanding of their origin with an implicit realisation that they have other kin undoubtedly with different cultures, values and expectations.

The following three chapters will take a detailed look at ways in which parents tell children about their origins, their thoughts about returning to the child's birth country and whether they have searched for, or are considering searching for members of the child's birth family. An examination of these three aspects of post adoption experiences (telling the adoption story, returning to the birth country and searching for or information about birth relatives) is of central importance because each contributes to the child's future sense of who they are and how they fit into society. However, this introduction will begin with a look at issues related to identity and identity formation and why it is considered an important aspect of adoption and why there has been much debate about how children form a strong sense of their own their identity when they do not share biological roots with their parents and other kin members.

Identity Formation

What is meant by identity? Identity comprises many constituent parts and has both personal and social elements. As we go through life our experiences and perceptions change and so does our sense of who we are. The personal or internal element of identity (Jenkins 1994, 1996) combines relatively consistent specific individual sets of facts that are organised as a personal history or biography. According to Josselson (1987) personal identity combines a series of personal attributes, natural talents, intelligence, social class, physical attributes, genetic aspects of temperament etc all rendering uniqueness to the individual. However, as well as genetically inherited attributes which contribute to personal identity formation a positive sense of personal identity is founded on the quality of emotional care provided by parents and having a strong personal identity offers a good base from which to tackle the challenges of social identity. Despite the desirability of having a strong sense of personal identity adoptees may find it difficult to sustain a satisfying personal identity as they are deprived of assistance from the part of the personal identity which is connected to sameness. This is because they are unable to keep up a particular narrative because they do not know where they come from. The lack of 'origins' in their story creates a narrative 'hole' which is important to adoptees and many will have a need to fill this 'hole' by finding out as much as they can about themselves. When they are young this will be a task or a process for which the parents are responsible.

The social or external aspects of identity formation (Jenkins 1994, 1996) have to do with a person's sense of belonging to a community and other social groups and this is the topic of Part Four which will look in more detail at the ways in which families encourage their children to learn about the culture of their birth country and how they support their children in developing a positive ethnic identity.

Identity and adoption

As mentioned above, a core feature of identity theory is that of similarity and difference and Kirk (1981, 1984) has argued that identity problems implicit in the roles of both parents and children in adopting families is best managed via an openness about adoption, showing honesty and enthusiasm about the child's origins, and an acceptance that being an adopted child is both different but special. Kirk produces evidence to show that parents who display an 'acknowledgement of difference' lay the foundations for personal stability, ego strength and good mental health in their adopted children. A 'rejection of difference' by parents tends to inhibit the development of openness, which allows the child to feel comfortable asking about adoption related issues. These parents, in their desire to assimilate 'normal' parenthood and family life, believe it is preferable to forget about being adopted. However, it must be noted that extremes of either of these perspectives is not considered ideal and Brodzinsky (1990), and Brodzinsky et al (1998) note how they have worked with families in clinical settings and who they characterise as using an 'insistence of difference' coping strategy and this, they suggest is a key cause of family disharmony and in some cases can lead to unfavourable views of the biological parents. Most children who are adopted from overseas will belong to an ethnic group which is different from their parents and in such cases there is presumed to be no alternative but to 'acknowledge difference' (Trolley et al 1995).

Dalen (1999) investigated the impact of parent's perceptions about degrees of similarity and difference amongst adoptive family members. Starting from the premise that if people are able to recognize a part of themselves their child, whether adopted or not adopted, will strengthen feelings of identification and closeness between children and parents Dalen (1999) suggests that adoptive parents and children will seek common areas of interest that provide a chance of feeling similar because this will to some extent reduce the feeling of being different. Therefore, perceiving elements of similarity becomes a coping strategy but, Dalen points out, this is not a denial of the child's background. Her findings show that despite a great deal of difference in appearance, many parents and their adopted children often pointed out and emphasized many aspects of similarities

between themselves. In addition, an association was found between the degree to which the adoptees felt they belonged to the family and the degree of similarity and acceptance by family members i.e. the degree of belonging is a function of the degree of acceptance in the family and the degree of perceived similarity between family members (Dalen 1999). In support of these ideas, Irhammar (1999) points out that adoptees who have an extreme interest in their ethnic background and who have little self-confidence feel that they have little in common with their adoptive family. What each of these studies suggests is that an individual's development will be optimal in situations where there is a 'match' or compatibility between the child's characteristics and needs and the surrounding environment and expectations within the family.

Identity and kinship

It has been suggested that in western societies identity is often thought of as being derived from broad social phenomena such as one's family of origin or community of origin (Billington et al 1998) which, therefore raises a number of issues concerning identity and kinship for people who have been adopted. It also means that parents have to re-evaluate their sense of identity and kinship especially when they adopt children who have a different ethnic background to them. Mothers when out with their children may have people assume that their husband is black; the children may have to cope with racist attitudes at school⁶⁷ or will at least be seen as different. In the future when the adoptee marries it may be to someone of a different ethnic origin, therefore, how will this impact on their perceptions of themselves in their birth country? Cohen (1994) talks about the importance of family life for children noting the importance of genealogy in adoption which is often manifest at the individual level in the quest for origins. Many other writers including Jenkins (1996) acknowledge the importance of family and kinship membership as part of individual identity formation (Strathern 1992, Telfer 1999). Identification with kin establishes relationships of similarity with descendents and differentiates between kin and non-kin group membership. However, in adoption the

⁶⁷ See chapter 9 for further discussion about experiences of racism.

extent to which adoptees can create a sense of identity that is based on kinship is particularly problematic (Telfer 1999).

Family life as outlined by Strathern (1992) consists of two overlapping principles. The first consists of the social arrangements in the form of household composition and conventions of marriage and the second, is composed of the 'natural' arrangements in the form of birth and the inheritance of genetic characteristics. It is the combination of these two via culture-specific arrangements which forms what are understood as 'kinship' networks (p17) i.e. the social construction of natural facts. For a person to be unambiguously part of any kin group they are both related by blood and form part of the household. It is within the bounds of the family household that children are provided with the parameters of self-consciousness (Cohen 1994), and where they experience a social, cultural and linguistic background that continues to influence the individual throughout their lives. For those who have been adopted there is additional 'identity work' to accomplish because they have to base their identity on 'the concept of two sets of parents' (Triseliotis 1973) and also the fact that the birth parents gave them up for adoption (Small 1991).

Identity and difference

Saetersdal and Dalen (1991, 2000) from results of their Norwegian research identified two different coping strategies used by adoptees to manage their 'differentness' and to cope with personal development. Generally they found that being Norwegian was very important to adoptees and they did not want to be identified with immigrants from similar cultural backgrounds. Those who successfully identified themselves as mainly Norwegian had fewer psychological problems and greater self-esteem than those who did not. The first coping strategy was an active exploration of their adoptive status, ethnic identity and biological and cultural backgrounds and the second, a defensive denial of the significance of their genetic and cultural heritage. For the second coping strategy to

succeed adoptees had a need to be recognised and accepted as Norwegian by those around them.

It has been suggested that a denial of origins or a lack of interest in ones' origins is a weak foundation for an identity that can cope with stereotypes and racism in society (Kirk, 1981, Dalen and Saetersdal, 1987). However, Brottveit (1999) questions this by suggesting this is an ideological argument rather than a truly theoretical one and he goes on to raise some questions about whether intercountry adoptees can truly have an ethnic identity and also questions whether they should have one? His research reveals that the majority of intercountry adoptees experienced conflicts between their own feeling of group membership in the majority population group, and external categorisation, which puts them into a minority category as 'immigrant' or 'foreigner'. Adoptees felt fewer problems about being accepted by their family, close friends, and classmates because people who knew them accepted them as the persons they were. He found a wide variation in attitudes among adoptees towards their origins, their own appearance and the importance they gave it. Some adoptees had visited their birth country before they were able to fully consolidate their Norwegian ethnic identity. Therefore, it cannot be taken for granted that an adoptees interest in their origins via a return to their country of origin means they will take on the identity of that country. Irhammar and Cederblad (2000) extend the discussion about the meaning of return visits and suggest that such visits are part of the 'outer search' where the purpose is a 'quest for information' and may include an active search for knowledge about the biological family (p155).⁶⁸ Each of these studies suggest that returning to the birth country, or searching for birth relatives, does not mean they have an identity crisis.

The following three chapters will each examine one aspect of how adoptees learn about their biography and their heritage, as told by the parents. The first part will be telling

⁶⁸ The 'inner search' is about how much adoptees think about their biological family.

about the circumstances of the adoption including the parent's journey to collect the child, information about their birth family, and reasons given to the child about why they were adopted. A vital component in the jigsaw of identity formation is knowledge about one's background and birth family which not only includes a family history but information about one's country, race and ethnic group (Triseliotis 1973, Haimes and Timms 1985). Adoptees seek to place themselves in a narrative, having a story, their story, to tell, and they do this in order to correct that part of their lives which gives them a marginal identity i.e. information about key people and events in their lives (Haimes and Timms 1985). However, it may be hard to form a sense of identity when vital information about oneself and one's heritage is missing and for children who have been adopted from overseas who share neither biological nor ethnic roots with their adoptive parents the task will be particularly difficult one. It is therefore important for them to learn about their origins and during their childhood it will be their adoptive parents who will be the main source of information.

Sharing information about the child's origins in a caring and open way is seen as a step towards forming a positive self-identity (Grotevant 1997). For a number of years now there has been a move away from secrecy in adoption (Grotevant et al 1994, Grotevant and McRoy 1998, McRoy et al 1994) with a growing acceptance that openness is helpful to all those who are part of an adoption (Triseliotis et al 1997) and one aspect of 'openness' includes telling children that they are adopted and telling them from an early age. However, parents have to tell the adoption story convincingly enough to ease children's feelings of loss and rejection (Register 1991) and to do this they have to have sufficient information available to them that will satisfy questions from their children. This is often a major problem for parents who have adopted children from overseas.

Research by Brodzinsky et al (1984) suggests that children do not understand the meaning of being adopted until they are about five to seven years of age and even then their understanding is quite limited. However, they also found that children much younger than this were capable of describing the story of how they came to the UK with

their new parents, describing in very accurate detail about being born in another country and flying on an aeroplane, but this did not mean they understood the significance of the story. This is similar to findings in this study. As the child gets older there will be a need for adoptive parents to help them with more detailed accounts about their origins beyond the story of the how the parents collected them from their birth country and came back to the UK on an aeroplane. They will have to help their children cope with a sense of loss and one way of doing this is supporting the child's curiosity and need for information about the birth parents and his or her origins and possibly searching for birth parents.

The degree to which parents are able to confront these issues openly and honestly will aid the child's positive sense of who they are and encourage the development of positive feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Ryburn 1991). Therefore, how parents communicate about adoption is important because children who have been adopted need to receive positive messages about their past and their family of origin. It is difficult for adopted children to feel positive about themselves when they know they have been relinquished or/and abandoned by their birth family. Issues related to abandonment will be particularly difficult for parents to explain to their children in a positive way and Ngabonziza (1991) reminds us that many of the children who live on the streets in countries like Brazil and Guatemala have not been abandoned by their parents but both parents and children are victims of the severe economic situation which exists in their countries. It is not a question of rejection or neglect on behalf of the parents but one of economic necessity because they and the children are denied access to means to satisfy their basic needs. For a parent to put a child in an institution does not mean they have abandoned them but it is a means of ensuring their child's survival and access to resources. Romania experienced many economic and political pressures during the Ceausescu years and had pro-natalist policies in which legal abortion was banned; in contrast China implemented the One Child Policy as a means of population control and created a crisis in the rejection of baby girls (Selman 2000). The result in both countries has been an excess of babies whom parents feel under pressure to 'abandon' to the care of state-run institutions. Parents are likely to feel they have very little choice about

relinquishing/abandoning the children, whether they understand the implications of their actions or not. Certainly birth parents who relinquish or abandon their children into the care of the authorities do not receive counselling on the meaning and effect of adoption, nor on alternative ways of providing care for their children (Tolfree 1995).⁶⁹

The second part of the adoption journey for adoptees will be to learn about the culture of their birth country and possibly to make a return visit. Therefore, parents who adopt children from other countries need to be aware that not only will their children have great feelings of loss, but may also have a need to reconnect with their country and/or culture and possibly search for their birth families at some point, and adoptive parents will need to support their child's interest in learning about the culture of their birth country. Keck and Kupecky (1995) suggest that one way parents might help their children with such identity issues is to plan a return trip to their birth country. Such trips will be done for a variety of reasons, goals and expectations and are often for older adoptees, probably teenagers and older. However, Howell (1999) warns about the dangers of making assumptions about the impact of return trips or reunions and gives two examples of different responses from adoptees after return trips to their birth country. The first was a girl returning to Bangladesh and feeling no rapport with the culture she encountered nor with her birth mother, father and sisters whom she met. The second was about a girl from Ecuador being reunited with her family and country which she experienced as 'dramatic and exultant'. Similar contrasting experiences were reported by Yngvesson and Mahoney (2000) about a Korean adoptee who was said to 'hate everything Korean' and longed for an identity that was 'blonde and Swedish, whilst another adoptee was desperate to know all about her Korean ancestry and described the complexity of 'trying to absorb the 'black'while holding onto the Swedish'(p103).

⁶⁹ Research with non-relinquishing birth parents suggests they receive inadequate support or counselling about alternative ways of providing care for their children or about the impact of adoption (Mason and Selman 1997).

The third stage of the journey, which will be examined, is the search and reunion because not only might children have a need to reconnect with their birth country and/or culture via a return visit, but also they may want to search for their birth families at some point. The idea about searching for birth relatives, usually the mother, and the need for contact as well as information about the birth family is becoming more and more a part of adoption practice in the UK (Lowe et al 1999, Parker 1999). However, for overseas adoption this is often more difficult to organise but the underlying principles about the benefits to all members of the adoption triad are the same.

Policy Related Issues

Adoptees today in the UK have more access to information about the circumstances of their adoption and about their birth family than they ever had in the past. It is now generally accepted that there is a need to know about one's past and secrecy is not in the best interests of the child. However, the availability of information for intercountry adoptees differs greatly from country to country. It is therefore becoming more and more important for sending countries to set up and control the mechanics for gathering information about the birth family, about medical history and other information that adoptees may wish to know about in the future. It could also be suggested that it is not enough for receiving countries to enforce and control procedures in their own countries but they could take on the role of encouraging sending countries to gather as much information about the circumstances of all their children who are adopted overseas. Recommendations within the 1993 Hague Convention suggest that it is an obligation of receiving countries to retain and make available information from the sending countries about the adopted children and the most likely body to do this would be the Central Authority in each country. Samwell-Smith (2000) agrees there should be a centralised institution that contains information about ICA children and their birth parents which would/could be a starting point for searching.

It has also been suggested (Selman and Wells 1996), that part of a post adoption support service, counselling could be offered to families prior to them making a search for birth family members, in a similar way in which counselling is available in the UK when adoptees request access to their original birth certificate (if adopted before 1978). During such counselling sessions families and their children would have the opportunity to voice worries and concerns. Similar counselling could be offered on their return to the UK. This raises a number of issues about the role and responsibilities of overseas adoption agencies, which will be discussed further in chapter 10.

Chapter 5: Telling the Adoption Story

5.1 Introduction

In an earlier period adoptions were based on the premise of forgetting the child's past and especially forgetting the birth parents but adoption practice has changed dramatically of recent years (Triseliotis et al 1997, Hoksbergen 1998). Contemporary adoption discourse encourages adoptive parents to talk to children about adoption and about their personal biography (Mullender 1991, Adcock et al 1993). The promotion of these changes has come from social workers and agencies, the adoption community and sometimes through the policies in sending countries (Volkman 2003). Parents who have adopted children from overseas face the same tasks as parents of children who have been adopted domestically telling them about the circumstances surrounding their adoption but overseas adopters also have a set of additional tasks. The main one is the acknowledgment of the children's dual heritage that will include the country of origin, as well as ethnic, cultural and racial characteristics (Triseliotis et al 1997). The telling of the adoption story and the sharing of information and experiences will continue throughout the life of the adoptee into adulthood. However, the story will change and the manner in which information is received and processed will change. As children get older the questions they want to ask and the interests they have about their past will change and parents will have to acknowledge this and be prepared for such eventualities. Levels of interest will vary, as will responses from parents. By looking at the way in which parents respond to the task of telling children about their origins, both personal and cultural, it is hoped to gain a better understanding of the complex range of issues that are involved in this process.

Research shows the importance of adoptive parents communicating clearly and openly when talking about adoption and their children's origins (Howe and Feast 2000, Feast and Howe 2003). To begin with, parents have to take into account the age of their child and many ask themselves, when is the right time to begin the story, how is the story to be

told and what is to be told? However, the range and accuracy of information available to parents varies considerably and the validity of some information may be questioned because of problems of translation (Goldberg 1997). Therefore, the adoption 'story' is far from complete and there may be aspects of the information about the circumstances of the relinquishment and pre-adoption history that is painful to talk about. Finally, account has to be taken of the fact that the telling of the adoption story is not only telling the child their story but also it is likely to involve telling other people, including family members and members of the wider community. Each of these aspects of the telling of the adoption story will be discussed and addressed in this chapter.

5.2 Obtaining Information about the Children

Parents may be concerned about when to talk to their children about adoption, how to talk to them and be concerned if their children appear to be taking little interest in the story they are being told. However, what may have the biggest impact on the telling of the adoption story is the amount and the accuracy of the information the parents have about their child's background.

The more familiar parents can become with the details about their child's pre-adoption history and the more practised they are at telling the adoption story, the more comfortable they will be transmitting the sensitive information to the children. This is why it is important for parents to have the information at hand before they can begin to tell the adoption story. Many of the families were only given basic information and found getting further information about their adopted child quite difficult and often impossible. Families adopting from China were generally given basic information about their daughters including details about where they were abandoned, their physical condition at the time of abandonment, and a date of birth. There may also be some information about the time spent in the orphanage including the developmental stages the child has reached and things like bedtime routines, basic dietary habits and whether they are toilet-trained or not.

There were however families who had a substantial amount of information about their children. In some cases this was because the parents had met or been in communication with the birth parents (18,11, 16, 26), met their children's foster carers (19, 31) or knew about the child's time spent in the orphanage (20, 13) because they themselves had visited the orphanage during their child's stay there. Parents who adopted children from Sri Lanka will have been provided with a social inquiry report about the circumstances of the children at the time they were placed for adoption. However, many of these did not provide the amount of detail many parents would have liked.

Sometimes the only opportunity families have for getting additional information is at the time the baby is handed over to them. A carer from the orphanage or a foster carer may be present at the time that the child is handed over to the adoptive parents and they will have knowledge about the day-to-day life of the child and questions can be asked. Nevertheless, this is an emotionally charged time and one in which the parents may for the very first time realise that they are now parents who have full responsibility for someone else's child. In addition there are the necessary official procedures that have to be attended to and this may not be seen as an appropriate time to be asking questions, and also, there are most likely to be language differences where questions have to go via an interpreter. On the other hand there were parents who had developed relationships with their children's foster carers from whom they had been able to obtain large amounts of information about the child itself and limited amounts of information about the circumstance of the relinquishment.

5.2.1 The role of adoption agencies

A major problem about the way intercountry adoption is managed in the UK is that there is no agency working on behalf of parents in the sending countries which is why many parents are left trying to get adequate and additional information about their children. It is the authorities or agents in the sending countries who have responsibility about what

information and how much information, they think the adoptive parents will need. In Scandinavian countries, where agencies act as mediators between parents and the sending countries, the gathering of information is part of their job. Over time and through experience of working with families they develop an understanding about the need for policies and procedures for handling the families need to know about their children's biological families (Andersson 2000). In the USA, where there are numerous private agencies who facilitate overseas adoptions, there is the problem that in many cases parents have to sign disclaimers so that the agencies cannot be held responsible if anything goes wrong. Therefore, it is not the lack of adoption agencies per se which is the problem but the type of agency and the ideology underpinning the work of the agency.

5.2.2 Abandonment and the lack of information

The families who had adopted children from China had additional problems obtaining biographical information about their children because all the children in this sample had been abandoned. In addition the information given by the orphanages is limited and direct contact with the orphanages is discouraged since the airing of the television documentary *the Dying Rooms* (June 1995). However, one family (09) did visit their daughter's orphanage and spoke with the director to try to gather more information although the director was unable to tell them anything more than the parents had already been told. Situations like this leaves families speculating about their child's story and this particular adoptive mother (09) speculated that the birth mother of her adopted daughter might have been one of the many people who died during the severe floods the area had experienced around the time of her child's abandonment. Two further families (03, 06) mentioned this flooding, and the possible death of birth family members as an explanation that might be given to their daughters when the issue of birth families was raised at a later date. It could be asked what information was it these parents were hoping to find when they visited the orphanage in which their daughter had lived? Were they hoping to find details about the birth family of their daughter or were they hoping to reassure themselves that the birth relatives were untraceable? No parents mentioned that

in some countries it is a crime to give away children and anonymous abandonment may seem like the only way out for birth mothers who are unable to continue caring for their baby. Parents who feel unable to continue caring for their baby will be under severe emotional stress and abandonment may feel like their only option. The situation faced by birth mothers in China (and many other sending countries) may seem extreme but the problem of abandonment is not only a dilemma for third world countries and recent developments in the USA have seen the enactment of Safe Haven statutes⁷⁰. Such laws can be seen as sanctioning the abandonment of babies but it is suggested that these laws have come about as a 'compassionate response to the increasingly publicized problem of mothers who kill their infants or abandon them in unsafe places' (Appell 2002a). In effect the new laws are changing the legal definition of abandonment to that of relinquishment if babies are left in one of the newly designated 'safe havens'. By doing this mothers are protected against any criminal liability with which they would have been charged had they abandoned the baby elsewhere. There are still a number of issues that continue to be problematic. The provision of safe havens may encourage abandonment and as Appell (2002b) points out such statutes do not begin to address the underlying problems faced by mothers, including social and familial isolation.

Other information as simple as the birth date can be problematic when a child has been abandoned. The dates given on official documents will often be estimates that are based on the child's physical development. In a situation where details have been provided by the birth mother (notes are often left attached to the babies clothing) it is probably safe to assume that this date is based on the Chinese calendar which is different from the Roman calendar, as used in the UK. One mother illustrated this by saying that her daughter's birthday on her abandonment certificate was the 25th March because this was the date given on a note left with the baby when she was abandoned. However, as the adoptive mother pointed out:

⁷⁰ 21 July 2003 - forty-five states have enacted Safe Haven statutes (National Conference of State Legislatures). Details of Safe Haven legislation are in scattered sections of state statutes (Appell 2002a).

“.....the 25th March on the Chinese calendar isn’t the 25th March on our calendar so she wasn’t really born then. Anyway, the guide sort of went, ‘no matter, no matter’, and Sara was screaming and I can’t even remember what Peter [husband] was doing. You are in the situation of trying to find out all the information and I was trying to question this date of birth and saying it was all wrong and it somehow got lost in the rest of the conversation trying to find out what had to happen next.” (05)

Therefore, families have to decide which date to accept and some may decide to have the date on the abandonment certificate changed.⁷¹ In this sample group of eight families adopting from China the majority accepted the given date as unproblematic but one of the families told about Americans who are having tests done on the children’s bones to determine more accurately their birth dates. At first this seemed an unnecessary process to put the children through but it was pointed out that with reference to schooling it could be significant especially for a child born in the summer months. It could mean the difference between them being allowed to start school or having to wait another year:

“We have accepted her birthday as it is, we wouldn’t question it at all. We are quite comfortable with it. I suppose if you look back to the minute details, the actual abandonment itself and how people are not able to chase records and all the rest of it there are bound to be doubts.”(05)

5.2.3 Background health information

Another, possibly more important, aspect of inaccurate information is related to health issues. One mother talking about the adoption of her daughter from China (09) had been told that she had a heart defect, but after returning to the UK she was found not to have any such defect. Another, slightly less serious problem was a family (05) who were not told about their daughter’s lactose intolerance. They only discovered this after they were having problems getting the child to drink milk only to discover she had an allergy to cows milk.⁷²

⁷¹ Discussion on www.cach.org.uk about the benefits of re-adopting in the UK in order to get a birth certificate for children adopted from China and on this there is mention about this being ‘an opportunity to change the child’s name and - on production appropriate evidence - her date of birth’ (p1).

⁷² The child may not have been diagnosed as having this problem before she left for the UK.

Mather and Kerac (2002) discuss the findings of several pieces of research including two that focus on the inaccuracy or lack of information available about children's health at the time of the adoption. The first study (Albers et al 1997) was about Russian children adopted into the USA where the health records of the children were described as of poor quality and with diagnoses being unsupported by documentation. This is particularly problematic from a country with growing numbers of children being placed for adoption who have foetal alcohol syndrome. The second study was British and was about children entering the UK to live in Hampshire from a range of countries (Harnott and Robertson 1999). Of the thirty-five children in the study medical forms were only available for twenty-two, representing sixty six percent over all, of these the majority were poorly completed with little detail about either the family's medical history or specific ailments suffered by the child. In their article Harnott and Robertson (1999) emphasise the importance of screening the health and development of children brought into the UK. In addition they suggest this is an important issue, which is not often fully covered by social workers during the Home Study Assessment sessions with prospective adopters. They say a range of related issues should be conveyed to prospective adopters at the time of preparation and training. Applicants should have a clear understanding about the probable lack of information available in respect of the birth family and the child's history and the potential risks of these unknowns. However, this is a matter about which sending countries should be made aware - the importance of information about the birth family and accurate information about the health of the child and if possible any known heredity factors that may be useful in the future.⁷³ The USA, with its greater experience of intercountry adoption, has for some time put more emphasis on the importance of health (physical and mental) related issues and the importance for parents to get accurate assessments of their children before they make the commitment to proceed with the adoption. As long ago as the mid-1990s Dana Johnson from the International Adoption Clinic at the University of Minnesota came to the UK to speak to

⁷³ An increasing awareness about the need for accurate health screening has resulted in the BAAF Medical Group producing draft Practice Note 46 'Health Screening of children Adopted from Abroad' for consultation - closing date 26 September 2003.

parents about potential problems of not getting adequate information about their children⁷⁴. He has since published many articles about health assessments for children adopted from overseas (Johnson 1997a, 1997b).⁷⁵ However, the importance of having accurate information about health-related issues is not something which the children themselves will be interested in when they are young and first come to live with their new families in the UK but such information may be critical in the future if the child suffers unexplained episodes of ill health. Also, in the future children may be interested because health status is a part of their history, heritage and biography. Often when adoptees are adults and have children of their own they become aware of the importance of knowing about hereditary and genetic links at an emotional as well as a physical level. The uncertainty about children arriving in the UK with unrecognised health problems is well discussed in the recent BAAF leaflet (BAAF 2004) which incorporates guidance to parents and practitioners.

5.3 Telling the Children

A major task for all adoptive parents is telling their children about their origins in a way that will construct a personal biography that is easily understood by the child from an early age. The development of a child's adoption story has to be 'age appropriate' and this is often done via 'drip feeding' bits of information, opinions and feelings that are felt to be appropriate and in language which takes into account both the child's age and their cognitive development. i.e. not too little, not too much. However, it needs to be mentioned that there has been debate about what age parents should start talking to their children about adoption. Donovan and McIntyre (1990) suggested that young children have no need to know about the fact that they are adopted and what is more important to them is how much love, care and nurturing they receive. They go on to say that talking about adoption when children are very young is more to satisfy the needs of the parents.

⁷⁴ Conference organised by ARC (Adopted from Romania parent support group) and PNPIC (Parents Network for the Post Institutionalised Children) held in Coventry in 1996.

⁷⁵ See www.peds.umn.edu for a bibliography of Dana Johnson's work.

However the general consensus is that it is better to start talking about adoption earlier rather than later because in this way it is always part of a child's life (Melina 1991, 1998, Register 1991). This is despite the fact that children below the age of about eight years are unlikely to fully understand the concept of adoption and what it means about relationships with their adoptive parents and wider kinship (Brodzinsky et al 1981, 1984). A good illustration of how younger children may not fully understand explanations given to them was when one of the mothers who had adopted from China responded to her five year old daughter's accusation of:

"..... 'you're not my real mummy'. I explained, I had an answer, and I explained that I was her real parent and I wasn't her birth mother but I was her real parent. I thought she understood very well but then the next day she said, 'you are not my real mummy'. So, though it had gone in at one level intellectually, emotionally she hadn't understood. But since then it is almost never mentioned. But on occasions at night, she says, 'I love you best of all my mummies' and I say, 'I love you best of all my daughters'. She then says, 'well you haven't got any other daughters but I have got another mum.'" (24)

Parents who have adopted children from overseas who look different from them are likely to have less choice about leaving the telling about adoption till a later date (Hoksbergen 1986, Hoksbergen et al 1987). Being adopted has added a layer of 'difference' to the child's identity (Grotevant 1997) and being adopted from overseas adds yet another layer. Explaining differences can be difficult and children who have been adopted when they were very young have little or no memory about their past so it becomes the responsibility of parents to tell their children about their past. This must incorporate biographical information that includes both personal and cultural relevance. Questions which may have to be addressed include, 'why have I been abandoned?' a difficult task for any parent because, how do they explain to a child that their birth mother can no longer care for them? Issues of poverty, single parenthood and economic uncertainty are all factors impinging on relinquishment which children may, one day want to know about.

However, there was awareness amongst the parents that issues and concerns for parents change as their children are growing up and this includes the telling of the adoption story:

“Children change all the time and therefore adoption is reflected in that. So it needs to be discussed constantly, but not get too much of it. Getting the balance right.” (19)

All the parents were clear about the need to tell their children about coming from a different country. During the nineteen interviews, where the children were present, there was openness about the telling of the adoption story. A story which, it was apparent, had been rehearsed and retold on many occasions and one in which the children seemed to delight in repeating:

“She knows everything. She knows about mammy and daddy coming to China to collect her and fly home in an aeroplane.” (09)

This was one of the youngest children who, at the time of interview was not quite three years of age and, as suggested above did not fully understand the concepts or the implications of the story she was telling but the foundations were being laid for future conversations and questions. The older children were more likely to talk about more recent events including return trips to their birth country.

5.3.1 Photographs as an aid to telling the adoption story

The most common method of keeping the way open for talking about adoption has been photographs, usually those taken by parents during their stay in the birth country and there were several families who had photographs of the birth mother taken at the time of the adoption; in cases where attendance by the birth mother at court was a requirement by law (e.g. Sri Lanka and Guatemala). The photographs act as illustrations of the family's biography. Additionally all the families have kept official documentation about the adoption and as well as the photographs of their trips to the child's birth country at the time of the adoption, which are kept as confirmation of their experiences. The focus on the trip, via the photographs, supports parents' positive perception of the birth country.

The children and the parents are able to access them when they wish and the continued accessibility of the photographs is evidence of a degree of 'openness'. They allow the opportunity for both parents and children to remember; for the children to ask questions and the parents to respond as best they can.

Photographs are clearly a great visual representation of the story and were used by all the families to introduce the children to their birth countries and are used as an aid to begin the story about their origins. During interviews with the families adopting from China it was clear that they regularly spent time looking through their albums containing photographs of their trip. Families who had adopted their children a number of years ago had equal numbers of photographs but they were not accessed on such a regular basis and only one other family (10) got the photographs out during the interview. The families who had adopted most recently were those who looked at the photographs on a regular basis and those who adopted a few years ago looked at them less frequently. Therefore the value of photographs for the telling of the adoption story appears to be transient in nature and used as a reminder of the trip to collect the child but do continue to be a record of the adoption journey.

During the interviews where families got out the photographs the children recognised themselves and their parents and knew, at a simple level, their story of coming from their birth country and travelling by plane back to England. During three of the interviews with parents who had adopted from China each of the children (aged between two to four years) spent time looking through the photographs by themselves. The children were also keen to show the photographs to the interviewer, and in their own way, prompted by their mothers, told about how their mummy and daddy had gone to China to get them and how they had all travelled home to the UK on an aeroplane. (02,03,09):

"Every few days she gets them out and looks at them. She is very interested in all this." (09)

However, during another interview (10) where photographs were shown to the interviewer, and the children were present, neither child showed any interest despite being encouraged by the mother. The two children had been adopted from Sri Lanka and at that the time of the interview were aged nine years and eleven years. It is unclear why they took little interest in looking at the photographs but two possible explanations could be suggested. Firstly, they may simply be at an age where they have other things of interest going on in their lives, particularly activities outside the home, this was the explanation given by the mother. On the other hand, there may have been an overemphasis about adoption and the photographs, which then made the children react in a negative way. There is considerable debate about how much emphasis should be put on the fact that a family has been created via adoption. The theorist Kirk (1981, 1984) was the first to suggest that an acknowledgement of difference paved the way for better adjustments. However, Kaye (1990) suggests that it might be the case that adopted children could suffer from too much 'acknowledgement of difference' as well as from too little. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, during this interview (10) the largest percentage of time was taken up looking at their photograph albums and the mother, in particular seemed very keen to spend time looking through the albums rather than talking more generally about the family's adoption experience.

In direct contrast to this example, another family adopting from Sri Lanka (22) had two daughters who were very similar in age to the children mentioned above (nine years old), who were fully engaged and interested in what was being discussed during the interview with their parents. These two families (10, 22) were each part of a small group of families who had made a return trip to Sri Lanka, both families were members and part organisers of the Sri Lankan Adoption Group and active members of the Association of Families Adopting from Abroad (AFAA). During the time the interviewer spent with this family (22), which included the interview and an evening meal, the children each contributed to the general discussion, each had made part of the meal and were keen to show the interviewer souvenirs from their return trip to Sri Lanka. Also, the mother and her two daughters were in the middle of a project making a model of a typical Sri Lankan house which was shown to the interviewer. There was a general air of openness and

enthusiasm about Sri Lanka that was lacking during the interview with the children of the other family (10).

5.3.2 Different responses from different children

It is not within the bounds of this thesis to suggest why there were such differences because it is certain there will be a number of contributing factors that could be highlighted. However, a number of reasons could be suggested but without further investigation no conclusions can be drawn about why the two sets of children appeared to have different levels of interest in their birth country. The actual context within which the interview took place would be a first factor to consider; characteristics of the individual children - including age, gender and temperament and relationships between parents and children could be another influencing factor, where some children may feel dis-empowered by their parents whilst others may feel encouraged to voice opinions. There would need to be a better knowledge about the circumstances of the adoption circumstances to know whether there was something about the birth country that had made the children want not to remember.

There were further examples of children who did not respond in a positive way to stories about their birth country. The mother of a girl adopted from China commented that her daughter did not, at first, want to look at their photographs (05) and another noted that her daughter made negative responses about 'everything Chinese' (01). She gave the example of a Chinese doll which had been bought by a friend as a present for her daughter and her response was to 'send it flying off the table'.

5.3.3 Explanations to children about abandonment

Parents who adopt from China will have a particularly difficult task of satisfying their children's desire for a full personal biography because all the children have been abandoned and information is severely lacking. Explanations about why parents give up children for adoption is always difficult but explanations about abandonment may feel

especially hard as it is best not to perceive the birth parents in a negative way because this may lead the children into thinking that they themselves are in some way bad. It appears that all parents were aware of the Chinese government's One Child Policy and the reasons given by the Chinese Government for having such a policy and this was the focus for explanations about abandonment. The children were told that their mothers had been left with very little choice about being able to keep their baby and that the best that their mothers could hope for was that they would find a new family and have a good life.

Trying to offer explanations to a child about abandonment and the cultural context of abandonment is complex. An understanding about a child's level of cognition seems to be necessary but it is not clear whether the families have taken this on board because it seems that quite a variety of stories have been told to these children. During the interview with one mother (09) it was put to her daughter that:

"When you were a baby in China you lost your mummy and daddy didn't you and you had another name didn't you?" (09)

The mother explained her reasoning about why she preferred to tell her daughter that her birth mother was 'lost' rather than alternative explanations. She felt this was an easier concept for her daughter to grasp than the explanation given by one of her friends, that their daughter's birth mother had abandoned her because she was too poor to look after her herself. The reasoning behind explaining about the birth mother being 'lost' centred around how the child often lost things but it was not a disaster, life goes on as normal; sometimes she finds what she has 'lost' but other times she does not. What this is saying about the importance of the birth mother in relation to the child is unclear and should have been discussed in more detail at the time of the interview. However, it is also unclear whether explanations based around poverty and being 'poor' are any better. Register (1991) suggests that children can interpret 'poor' not only as an economic condition experienced by individuals, in this case the birth mother, but as a cultural poverty which can then be taken as a direct criticism of the people from a particular

country. The mother in this study (09) suggests that it would be difficult for a child to understand why families in the UK who are described as being poor do not give their children up for adoption.

5.3.4 Keeping the story alive

Despite the children adopted from Sri Lanka being older than those adopted from China at the time of the interview,⁷⁶ for at least one of the families adopting from Sri Lanka, the telling of the adoption story continued to be a part of everyday life. The father (28) explained how his son (aged nine years) often asked them to ‘tell me the story of when you got me’ and this was usually at bed time, but what invariably happened was that, ‘he falls asleep before you get to the end or he loses interest’. However, there was no doubt that it was a story he liked to hear and got comfort from hearing, despite the parents admitting that they sometimes think it was themselves who encouraged the telling of the adoption story partly because they had enjoyed being in Sri Lanka so much.

Telling the adoption story appeared to be something that had always been talked about amongst all the families and was not seen as an issue or problematic in any way. Talking about adoption was particularly easy for four of the families (02,11,14,22) as they explained during the interviews, adoption was a major part in their lives prior to the adoption of their children from overseas. Two of the adoptive mothers were themselves adopted as babies (02,14), one mother (11) had a sister who was adopted and finally, the sister of an adoptive mother had adopted children domestically (22).

One of the mothers who herself had been adopted and had since adopted two boys from Sri Lanka (14), was quite clear that the fact of being adopted and having an adopted sister had made it easier for her when it came to talking about adoption and this was because:

“I can’t imagine anything other than being adopted. It seems perfectly natural.”
(14)

⁷⁶ See Appendix E: Individual Family Profiles for the ages of children at the time of interview.

She spent some time during the interview explaining about her own search for her birth family and about the initial problems she had because she did not know which agency had handled her adoption. She also pointed out the use of language surrounding adoption and the impact this can have, illustrating this with the example of when she visited the office of the adoption agency who handled her adoption to enquire about obtaining information from her adoption file. There was a poster on the wall with the heading 'The Waif and Stray Society'. She appreciated that it was to illustrate the history of the agency but, at the same time, she found it upsetting. This, she felt was because the history of the agency was her history and this was a clear reminder of how she would have been portrayed at the time of her adoption. It made her very sad to think that she was once considered a 'waif' or a 'stray'.

One father (23) who had adopted a boy from Peru commented that knowing other families who had adopted helped to make adoption seem less unusual/different from the norm:

"He [son] knew quite a lot of adopted kids when he was much younger because I suppose of the contact you make at the time. We knew a couple who had adopted from America and we knew a woman who lived near-by who adopted just after us. So yes, he was aware of the concept of adoption and it's never seemed to be any trouble to him. If they grow up knowing they are adopted then it's normal. It's just another way of having a family and we try to make it very positive in the sense that, 'we chose you' which we didn't because that was the one thing that we were adamant we were not going to do. We were not going to go to an orphanage and pick a child." (26)

Despite all the families being open and talking about adoption to their children, and the children having always known they were adopted, one family who had adopted from Brazil (25) explained how their children were equally happy to talk about adoption to their friends. However, this was not always as straightforward as it may seem as they explained about an incident when the mother of one of their friends was expecting a baby, the friend found it especially difficult to understand why the two adopted children

did not live with their birth mother. To try to help the friend understand more fully, one evening the two adopted children got out their life story books to show the friend in the hope of giving a better understanding of how and why adoption occurs. However, an added complication to this particular adoption story was the existence of a birth sibling who had also been adopted but adopted by a family living in Italy and as the father noted:

"It's very difficult to explain that you have a blood brother who lives in Italy and an adopted brother who lives with you." (25)

5.3.5 Birth siblings as part of the adoption story

Writing in 1999, Mullender stated that, 'siblings matter to each other, even when they have no shared history' (p1) and notes the 'groundswell of interest from practitioners and policy makers' about the issue of sibling placements.

It is unclear exactly how many children in the sample may have siblings either known or unknown but three families did talk about the siblings of their children who were not living with them. There were two adopted children, a girl from Romania aged twelve years at the time of interview (17) and a boy aged nine years from Brazil (26), who had not been told they had siblings in their birth country. In addition there was a thirteen-year old girl, adopted from El Salvador (11), who knew and had met her brother. A family living in the UK had also adopted the brother. The parents adopting from Brazil (26) had met their adopted son's sibling (a brother) when the birth mother was pregnant with the child who the family adopted. During their stay in Brazil the adopters had met both the birth mother and her young son and had lived in the same household during the final stages of her pregnancy. The father explained that he did not think it was the right time to tell his son about the brother in Brazil and that it would be better to wait until his son asked about the existence of brothers or sisters. The other family (17) after making enquiries had recently learnt about a half-brother of their adopted daughter but had not shared this information with her. The mother was unsure what to tell her daughter or whether to tell her because of the conditions in which the brother was living - on the streets in Romania. He was apparently a well-known figure on the streets of Bucharest

and slept in the same doorway each night. This was not going to be an easy story to convey to their daughter.

A more complicated issue is that of so-called 'social siblings'. Many parents encounter problems when they apply to adopt two non-related children both at the same time as the UK government policy on adoption discourages the simultaneous placement of unrelated children (Beckett et al 1998) and prefers that only one non-related child is adopted at any one time. It is felt that this gives each child a better chance of settling into their new home and increases the attachment and bonding process. However, in the past this does not seem to have been an issue because there are three families (14, 22 29) who each adopted two children on the one visit to their chosen country - two from Sri Lanka and one from Ecuador. In some cases parents want to adopt two un-related siblings because the children were being cared for in the same institution or by the same foster parents and the prospective adopters had suggested that the children were 'social siblings' and it would be beneficial for the children to remain together. However, this was not the case for families in this study. The families knew they wanted two children and applied to adopt two children during the one visit, and having a home study that assessed them on their ability to parent two children. On the other hand they were aware that this might not happen because two children may not be available but it was their needs and wishes, rather than the circumstance of the children that was the motivating factor around adopting two un-related children at one time.

One of the families adopting from China (05) commented about the trauma her daughter must have been feeling leaving behind her 'cot mate' as she referred to her. In this instance the 'cot mate' was being adopted at the same time as their daughter and the two girls were being handed over to the new parents both at the same time. There have been similar accounts from adult Korean adoptees about how they felt leaving behind friends in institutions and how it felt being left behind (Cox 1999). Beckett et al (1998) in their study with Romanian adopting families found that, despite recommendations in DoH guidelines (1991), fifteen percent of families adopting from Romania had adopted more

than one unrelated child and there continued to be high levels of parental satisfaction with the adoptions.

5.3.6 Parent's concern about 'getting it right'

There were families however who were worried about whether they were managing the telling of the adoption story in an appropriate manner and in a way which satisfies the need of their children:

"To me it's always part of my thinking because I always think of the long term and how they are going to cope with the news and how they are going to cope with any questions and so on. So I think I am anxious about how to cope best with that. So I read things but I guess no parents know how things are going to turn out." (15)

Parents were often concerned about whether it was possible to 'get it right' when deciding about how much and how often to talk to their children about adoption issues. There were parents who commented on the differences between their children and the degree of questioning about different issues, not only those related to adoption. One of the mothers who had adopted from Sri Lanka (14) commented about how one of her two sons had always been more inquisitive and had always demanded explanations about everything. Therefore, it would not have surprised her if one child was inquisitive about his adoption story whilst the other was not. There may therefore be a need within one family to have two different approaches for handling issues related to adoption. It has been suggested that it will always be the case that some children talk more than others about adoption because they are more verbal about all aspects of their life and children who are more intense and emotional about expressing their feelings may react in a similar way about adoption. There may be children who appear to take less interest and there will be children who are less intense (Melina 1998).

5.4 Telling Others

For all the families it was apparent that discussing adoption amongst family members was seen as unproblematic but whether families felt the need to discuss or tell people outside the family was a different matter. There were occasions where families felt they or their children were being put in the position of having to explain about being adopted when they did not feel ready to offer such explanations. Differences in appearance between the children and members of the family had on occasions caused questions to be asked and explanations to be ‘demanded’. This was not something that only happened during the immediate period after returning to the UK but happened at any time, and as the father of a nine year old adopted from Sri Lanka commented:

“Sometimes I have noticed our daughters’ friends will look at me and ask, ‘oh, is that your dad?’ Just the other day she was with me and she sussed out this kid was a bit confused and she said, ‘I’m adopted you know’, sort of made it clear to him. There have been a lot of people over the years, from time to time, who ask how we came to adopt from abroad. Mostly they have been friendly enquiries and they ask these things because they are interested.” (27)

The father appeared comfortable in his acknowledgement that the difference in appearance between him and his daughter was the cause of speculation and enquiry from other people. This may have been helped because the district of London where they lived was one of the most ethnically diverse of the whole sample.⁷⁷

Several families adopting from China raised similar issues. After the early settling-in period an issue raised was that of ‘introductions’ and whether there was a need to introduce their adopted child as an adopted child and whether the obvious differences in physical appearance warranted explanations. This was particularly the case for the family who had adopted domestically as well as from China because they felt it was clear to see that their daughter was not theirs by birth but not so for the other adopted child. They found that people would ask quite intrusive questions about their daughter and how

⁷⁷ More about the impact of neighbourhoods in Chapter 8.

she had come to be living with them but the origins of their other adopted child was not questioned. The assumption being that this child was their child by birth. The parents did not like to make introductions or discuss information that they felt would make either of the children uncomfortable or cause them distress:

“If people ask direct questions I will say she is adopted from China, but I don’t volunteer. I won’t ever volunteer from an orphanage, or anything else because that’s our daughter’s personal history. It’s her information and I want her to have an understanding before I tell people.” (03)

One of the single mothers adopting from China (24) stated that she was not prepared to discuss all of her daughter’s personal history with strangers who, for some reason feel they have a right to ask quite personal questions. Other parents were also finding that adoption was being ‘thrust down her throat’ because a simply everyday thing like walking down the street could turn into an occasion in which adoption had to be addressed. Examples were given about people coming up to them in the street and asking the children where they were from and when told China proceeded to assume the father was Chinese.

Situations such as these made parents feel uncomfortable and they did not like being questioned or feeling obliged to provide explanations about what they consider to be private matters. However, as one of the mothers who had adopted from Sri Lanka explained, families could react in two ways to this questioning, with some people finding it offensive and problematic where others feeling it was all part of the experience of overseas adoption. But what she went on to emphasise was that the choice was theirs and how on some days and in some situations she was untroubled by the questioning but at other times and in different situations she would get annoyed and respond in a negative manner:

“People always stare at you if you suddenly turn up with children who don’t look like you but you soon get used to it. You decide this is with me for the rest of my life and I have to blooming-well get to enjoy it and you do. Because it’s a horrid tension around if you don’t. You go ‘extrovert’ because this is the only way to cope. We have two choices, you can let it get up your nose or you can enjoy it. We

are going to choose to enjoy it and you do. If you are fed up with people who are cross-questioning you, you walk away and leave them to work it out. If you like them and choose to give an explanation that is what you do; the choice is yours.”
(22)

Register (1991) and Melina (1998) suggest that neither parents nor children should feel they have to talk about the circumstance of the adoption unless they want to. However, it would be best if parents prepared themselves and their children with a range of answers to intrusive questions.

There were differences amongst the parents in their attitude to being stopped and questioned or comments being made. Initially it was seen as unproblematic and was viewed as an acceptance of the adoption by those they met but after a while one or two of the mothers were tiring of telling their story over and over again. Having experienced similar reactions when out with her son who was adopted from Peru, Bartholet (1993) suggests that it appears adoptive parents are not seen as being entitled to the same levels of privacy or respect as birth parents. She found some friends and colleagues would talk to her about adoptive parenthood in a way which implied that the relationship between her and her children was, in some way more impersonal than relationships between biological parents and their children.

Not all families found these situations uncomfortable and one mother explained that she did not feel that telling people about their child's adoption was problematic:

“It is natural curiosity. I mean Alice looks quite different from me, she's brown skin and dark haired and she looks different to me. So get it over with and then carry on as normal. People just want to know.” (11)

5.5 Summary and Discussion

After talking with families about the telling of the adoption story it soon became apparent that the task of telling the story had become the telling of two stories. There was the

telling of the adoption story to the children and, unexpectedly for most, there was the telling of the adoption story to others - often strangers, who wanted to know about how and why the child had come to live with the family.

It is widely agreed that it is best for parents to be open and honest with their children providing opportunities for them to acquire information that will help them to construct a personal biography that incorporates aspects of their past and their birth country. When parents begin telling a child about their personal biography the parent needs to have information but acquiring accurate background information and history about their children was not always easy. Access to information and the quality and reliability of information varied widely from country to country. Some countries with longer and well established international adoption programmes, are more likely to have systems which include gathering and saving information about the children and their birth families.

As a policy recommendation it is not enough to be aware of difficulties in obtaining information and to accept this is what happens. There is a need for far greater levels of consistency and a need for agreements about what information will be needed/useful for adopters and their children and the setting of minimum standards. A responsibility of adoption workers, adoption agencies and governments in receiving countries is to consistently inform, educate and encourage officials in sending countries to pursue reform to include an understanding about the need for information about birth families. Additionally there is a need for accurate recording keeping and storing of records which can be accessed by adoptees, if necessary, when they reach adulthood – an extension of what would be considered as good practice in the UK.

Children who had been adopted from orphanages, where the children had been abandoned there was likely to be less information available and, less possibility of seeking out further information at a future date. What was apparent was that many of the parents appeared unquestioning about the amount of information they had about their

children's circumstances prior to the adoption. Gailey (1999, 2000) suggests that part of this acceptance of minimal amounts of information is because the adoptive parents prefer to feel they have 'exclusive possession' of their children and consequently see the birth parents as 'socially dead'. There were parents who had speculated that the birth parents may be dead and there was feeling that they preferred this reality than the one where parents had 'chosen' to abandon their children. This perpetuates what has been called the 'orphan myth' (Gailey 1999 p63) which she describes as a 'legal fiction of orphan status' because it is rare if parents of adoptees are in reality dead. Gailey (2000) also discusses the anomalies whereby children freed for adoption within the USA are not called 'orphans' but children entering into the USA after being adopted in other countries are classified as 'orphans'.⁷⁸

Despite parents' acceptance of there being only small amounts of information, research has shown that more rather than less information is better for adoptees and their families. At the present time parents may feel they have sufficient information but there is the likelihood that in the future either they or their children may have a need to know more. Also, at the present time, whilst the adoptees are still children, their adoption story is a story presented to them by their parents i.e. any information they receive is mediated via the parents. It is the parents who decide what to tell the children, when to tell the children and in what way to tell the children. There is the problem for the adoptees that as adults there is likely to be no means for independent verification of the information they have received. In many cases there will be no adoption agency in their birth country that has files they can access and see firsthand information about themselves written at the time of the adoption. In the UK domestically adopted adult adoptees are being given more and more rights to access to information about themselves, beginning with access to their original birth certificate, their adoption file, post adoption support, entry on to the

⁷⁸ Foreign born children entering the USA are classified as orphans if they do not have parents because of the death or disappearance of, abandonment or desertion by, or separation or loss from, both parents. A foreign-born child is also an orphan if his or her sole or surviving parent is not able to take proper care of the child and the adoptive parents have to apply for an immigration visa for the child (INS 1-600). Data collection about the numbers of children entering the USA who have been adopted overseas are collected and collated under the heading of Immigration Visas Issued to Orphans Coming to the USA.

Adoption Contact Register and access to their adoption files. Intercountry adoptees will not benefit from a similar range of post adoption support from their country of origin so they will have to get it from the receiving country (in this instance the UK).

Generally, a concern about talking to children on the subject of adoption and their birth country begins with worries about the right time to begin telling the story. However, when a child has been adopted from overseas and whose appearance is different to that of the parents the decision about the right time is taken out of their control. It was clear that all the parents in this study who had adopted children from China had talked to their children about their origins as soon as they returned to the UK as a family (when the children were between the ages of one and two years). The families who had adopted babies (under one year of age) were also found to have been open in their discussions about the children's origins and this had started when the children were very young. This usually focused around the photographs the parents had taken during their stay in the children's birth country. The story of the parents' trip therefore 'becomes embedded in parent and child through the telling of the story' and by talking about their experiences during this trip provided the children with something 'concrete to grasp onto about their native land' (Yngvesson 2003, p16). One or two of the parents were proud that their children were able to retell the story about how their parents had collected them from their birth country and how they had all travelled back to the UK together. However, it was not clear whether the parents were aware that at this age (two to three years old) the children were unlikely to understand fully the concepts they were reciting or whether they appreciated the importance of continuing to talk about adoption throughout the whole of their childhood. Kirton et al (2000) found that levels of openness were high early on in the adoption but parents did not develop the telling of the adoption story, as the children grew older.

Having a study group that included children recently adopted and children up to the teenage years, made it possible to get an idea about how parents continued to talk about adoption and the children's birth countries. Certainly in respect of the most recent

adoptions, which were the ones from China and one of the Guatemalan adoptions (07), the families were discussing their trips to the birth country as a way of introducing the children to their origins. In families where the adoption was less recent, conversations had moved on from talking about the trip to the birth country and explanations about the reasons for the adoption to a wider interest in the country itself. There were families who had made return trips to the birth country (see following chapter for further discussion), and there were others who used a variety of methods to incorporate into their everyday lives the culture of their child's birth country (see chapter 8).

Further important aspects of the child's biography that have to be talked about with the children are the circumstances of their birth mother at the time of the adoption and reasons for the adoption (Neil 2000). The parents had the task of trying to answer the 'why' questions about the children's adoption. Explanations about why children are relinquished for adoption appear to be particularly difficult because whatever explanations are given to the children there are an equal number of suggestions about the negative impact of such explanations. The concept of choice and how much choice birth mothers realistically had when they made the decision to give their child up for adoption needs to be taken in to considerations when explanations about relinquishment are being given to children. Register (1991) notes, it is often too easy for us to assume choice. In the society in which we live we believe ourselves to be self-reliant and are constantly weighing options about a range of issues related to many parts of our lives. Such choices and options may not be so readily available to the birth mothers in the countries in which overseas adoptees were born. Many birth mothers today in third world countries will find themselves in similar situations as birth mothers in the past in the UK, when the stigma of single parenthood pressured them into relinquishing their babies for adoption. In recent years there have been many published accounts of how young single mothers in the 1950s, '60s and '70s felt they had no choice but to give away their babies for adoption (Morris 1999, Hughes and Logan 1993, Howe et al 1992, Bouchier et al 1991, Fittell 1989) but there has been less concern about birth mothers from the sending countries. However, one account given by Giberti (2000) of birth mothers living in Argentina found that fifty percent of the relinquishing mothers did so

because their families would not support them in keeping the child. In addition to this there were no policies to support single mothers who wished to keep their child. What Giberti is most critical of is the adoption agencies and other social services that prioritise the 'best interests of the child' seeing them as the victim, without seeing that the mother is also a victim and suggests birth mothers are:

'..... ignored by statistics, ignored by public institutions, morally denigrated, misunderstood by so many professionals, and taken advantage of by certain "charitable" souls.' (Giberti 2000 p465)

Another concern highlighted during the interviews was the issue of birth siblings where it was clear there was a wide range of experiences and many of the situations were complex. There were families who knew that their children had birth siblings but there were a number of others who were unsure whether there were other children in the birth family or not. One or two did speculate that despite there being no other children in the family at the time of the adoption this situation could easily have changed over the years, as the birth mother's circumstances changed. The issue was whether to tell the children about their siblings and/or when to tell them. However, this was something that could be ignored or delayed for the present but not if or when parents and children start to think about tracing birth family members. There would have to be discussions about how the children (adoptees) would feel if there were brothers or sisters in the birth country.

Finally, with reference to telling children their adoption story the debates concerning getting the balance between acknowledgement of difference and rejection of difference (Kirk 1981, 1984) have to be taken in to account because an over emphasis of difference can be detrimental to children. What children need is to get a sense of belonging but that cannot happen if they are constantly being reminded of differences between themselves and other members of the family. Research from Scandinavia seems to suggest that where adoptees identify with the majority population i.e. do not see themselves as different, there are better levels of mental health (Irhammer and Cederblad 2000). The parents in this study certainly begin talking to their children very soon after the adoption

but as time passes so does the importance of talking about this. However, this does not mean that, in slightly more subtle ways, there is not an acknowledgment within the family that the child's origins began elsewhere. This is reflected in the way families had moved on from talking about adoption per se to talk about the birth country.

Talking about adoption to the children was something all parents had always expected to do but what did come, as a surprise to them was the problem of talking to others about their family composition and the adoption. Initially questions by strangers when walking out in the street were viewed in a positive and validating the adoption. However, as time went on unsolicited comments were seen by some as more problematic and in many cases were seen as intrusive. On occasions parents had cause to deflect answering questions about their children's parentage because they felt it was improper to talk about such personal details in front of the children. This was the children's story for them to tell when they were comfortable with the details and when they were happy for people to be told. Also, they question the right of strangers to ask this type of question in the first place. However, there was also a sense that this was an issue parents from which children had to be protected and there was little acknowledgement that perhaps it was the parents who were uneasy having to answer questions. Perhaps it was they who were uncomfortable being questioned about having a child who was different in appearance to them.

In conclusion, the telling of the adoption story, either to the children or to other people is an ongoing process that has been referred to as the adoption journey taking the adoptees well into adulthood. After children have been told and have begun to understand what adoption means and to understand explanations they have been given about the reasons why they have been adopted their questions may begin to broaden out to include an interest in returning to the country of their birth and even to contemplating a reunion with their birth parents (usually the mother).

Chapter 6: Returning to the Birth Country

6.1 Introduction

When children adopted from overseas reach adulthood, many choose to return to their birth countries – whether alone or as part of an organised homeland tour. An ‘adoptees’ gathering’ held in 2004 in Seoul, capital of South Korea, which for many years was the main source of children for intercountry adoption, attracted more than 400 adults adopted from the United States, Sweden and other countries. For many of these it was a first return to their birth country but it is becoming increasingly common for adoptive parents to take their internationally adopted children back to their country of origin and there is much discussion about the value of this; the appropriate age for such early visits; and whether they are made in the interests of the children or the parents.

None of the children in the families in this study were old enough to have undertaken a visit of their own, but several families had made or contemplated such a visit. The aim of this chapter is to explore the way in which parents discussed this possibility and to look at the experiences of those who had undertaken one. For those families who had not returned their feelings about possible future visits have been explored. The chapter shall conclude by looking at the implications of the replies for post-adoption advice and support for families who have adopted from abroad.

Before looking at the actual experience of families there shall be a brief look at the wider literature on the importance of the birth country for international adoptees and the views of some older adoptees who have written about their own return and of some of the organisations responsible for organising homeland tours.

6.2 Literature Review about Return Trips

There are many who believe that an adopted child's relationship with his/her country of origin is important with some links being stronger than other; some being mainly symbolic but others adding a 'concreteness' which aids the process of understanding about their origins and their heritage (Chistolini, 2002). It has been suggested that many adoptees (domestic or intercountry) have a sense of 'incompleteness' and for some this perception of themselves as incomplete can be intense (Telfer 1999). One way to alleviate this sense of 'incompleteness' for adoptees is to embark on a journey of discovery, and for intercountry adoptees part of this journey may involve returning to the birth country. Therefore, a return journey can be to learn about the birth country and to encourage a positive identification with the country but it can also entail a search and reunion with the birth family, usually the birth mother⁷⁹.

From this perspective, therefore, one important way in which adoptive parents can support their child's interest in their past and help the formation of a personal and cultural identity is by planning, what is often referred to in the USA, as a 'homeland tour' (Keck and Kupecky 1995). In the USA many of these trips are organised for groups of adoptees, often adolescents or young adults. Also, in the USA, where ICA is on a much larger scale than in the UK, there are a number of organisations (adoption agencies, parents support groups) that arrange these group trips to birth countries. However, to date, there have been no such trips organised by adoption agencies or parent support groups in the UK, but many families have made return trips which they have organised themselves.

It has been suggested by Chistolini (2002) that returning to the country of origin has a dual purpose, the first of which is to gain an understanding and acceptance of abandonment and secondly to gain an understanding and acceptance of their ethnic

⁷⁹ Searching for information about birth relatives and reunion is the subject of chapter 7.

‘difference’. There is no mention by Chistolini about tracing birth relatives. In contrast, when adoptees who have been adopted domestically begin a search for biographical information this often extends to a reunion with birth family members, usually the birth mother, but for intercountry adoptees and their families this may be particularly difficult because there is often a lack of detailed information. Additionally, for adoptees who had been abandoned, and/or adopted from institutions, reunions with birth parents may prove impossible.

Keck and Kupecky (1995), in their book written as a guide for parents and professionals, advise that trips should not be planned simply to satisfy the parents’ desire to expose the children to their culture because they believe this would not necessarily be in the child’s best interest. They think a trip should be organised when the child begins to show an interest in their birth culture and in returning to their birth country. However, when the children are young decisions about making a return trip will, in general, be made by the parents, although this does not imply that the children have no interest in their birth country or in visiting there. As all the children but one in this study were under the age of eighteen and many were much younger,⁸⁰ the parents were still making decisions and it was clear that the decision about whether to return to the children’s birth country had been the parents’ decision, not the children’s.

Despite some children showing no interest in their birth country parents should not assume they are not interested. Although Jardine (2000) suggests an over enthusiasm on behalf of parents can inhibit children. This idea is supported by the research findings of Irhammar and Cederblad (2000) who found that high levels of interest in the child’s origins by the adoptive parents seemed to diminish the adoptees own interest in their ethnic origins. The more intense interest in their ethnic origins was found in adoptees whose adoptive family displayed less interest in the child’s origins. One interpretation of Irhammar and Cederblad’s findings is that the parent’s interest and openness about the

⁸⁰ See Appendix E: Individual Family Profiles for the ages of the children at the time of interview.

children's birth country is sufficient to satisfy the children's interests. Alternatively it could suggest that the parent's intense interest about the birth country inhibits the children's levels of interest.

Looking back on her decision to return to her birth country, Sue Jardine (2000), writing as a young adult, recalls that she had been hesitant about returning but was clear that she had not wanted to go with her adoptive parents. This was because she did not want to be influenced by them. However, this did not mean that she did not want support. She says she needed emotional support during the time she was planning the trip but did not know who to get this from which was to some extent because she was unsure what it was she was wanting from the trip. During the return journey to China she felt amongst 'her own people' which was partly because she was not visible and she felt pleased when people spoke to her in Chinese because she no longer felt a 'foreigner' although the negative aspect of this was her inability to reply.

Unlike the decision by Sue Jardine to make a trip back to her birth country, alone, as an adult, intercountry adoptive families may choose to return as part of a group. Group return trips can be organised by the families themselves, or by the agency that arranged the adoption. As previously mentioned during the discussion about the process of adopting from overseas, the UK only has six approved voluntary adoption agencies offering services for prospective intercountry adopters and none of these have links with sending countries therefore parents wishing to make return trips have to organise the trips themselves.⁸¹ A good example of an adoption agency that organises such 'heritage trips' or 'homeland tours' is the Centro Italiano Aiuti all'Infanzia (CIAI) an Italian adoption agency that specialises in overseas adoption and also organises return trips to countries of origin. The agency does however have set criteria about who can be

⁸¹ All local authority social service departments have adoption and fostering units but, at the present time, it is unlikely that return trips to the adoptees birth country will become part of their post adoption remit.

included in one of their organised return trips. The first is that the child must be at least ten years of age, the adoption must have taken place at least five years previously and the child must want to make the journey - it is not to only be for the parents' benefit. The idea being that after five years of living with their new family the child will be well established and secure within the family. An advantage of returning as part of group organised by an adoption agency is that the agency is able to give psychological support throughout the journey and after returning home, at a time when families will want to reflect on issues that may have arisen. An additional advantage of returning as a group is that families can support each other, emotionally identifying with each other and can be there to offer practical advice and guidance to each other. The CIAI is quite clear that the purpose of the trips they organise is for the children and their families to learn more about the country of origin and its culture. They do not agree with searching for birth relatives because it is felt that adoption is an event that separates, once and for all the child minor from its biological parents and any other biological relatives (Chistolini 2002). They do however leave the way open for possible reunions with siblings in the future. In contrast to the Italian agency, the Nordic Adoption Council⁸² which organises up to ten 'homeland tours' a year, fully supports and facilitates meetings between adoptees and their birth relatives. They work in co-operation with the Central Authorities in the sending countries to gather information for adoptees about their origins and meetings with birth relatives can take place during a 'homeland tour' or on an individual basis (von der Leith 2000).

With these ideas in mind a look at which of the families in this study have made a return trip and which families have not returned will highlight which issues are seen as important to parents when they are considering return journeys.

⁸² The Nordic Adoption Council was formed in 1996 and has twelve member organisations with more than 20,000 members (von der Leith 2000).

6.3 Which Families have made Return Trips?

At the time of interview a total of thirteen families out of thirty-one families had returned with their children to the child's birth country. These included two returning to Brazil (25,26) and one family each to Chile (19), China (09), Ecuador (29), Guatemala (15) and Romania (17). However, Sri Lanka was the country to which the greatest number of families returned with their children (10, 14, 16, 22, 27, and 28).⁸³ This may have been because they were amongst the first families to adopt and the average age of the children was eleven years⁸⁴, making them some of the oldest in the sample. Out of the eight families adopting from Sri Lanka, six had made return journeys and two families had each been back twice. Three of these families (10,14,22) had made the trip together in 1998, with the remaining three families returning individually. The three families who had gone to Sri Lanka as a group were all members of the Sri Lankan Adopters Group and this was how they had got to know each other. They lived quite long distances from each other but attended meetings of the support group whenever they could.

The family who had adopted from Chile had made two return trips. Two families had returned to their children's birth country for a second adoption taking with them the first child they had adopted (15, 25). The single mother (31) who had adopted three girls from Guatemala had not taken her first adopted daughter with her for the subsequent adoptions. Similarly, the family adopting two children from the USA had not taken the first child when going over to the USA for the second adoption.

Only one of the families who had adopted from China had made a return trip (09). Why other families adopting from China have not adopted may be as much to do with the timing of these adoptions i.e. more recent. The eldest child in the sample adopted from China was only six years of age and the youngest two children were approximately

⁸³ Therefore the following sections recounting families' experiences of returning to their children's birth country is dominated by those returning to Sri Lanka.

⁸⁴ The eight families had adopted a total of twelve children with the four youngest children being aged nine years and the oldest child aged eighteen years.

twenty months old (01, 04). These two children had only been living with their new mothers (both were single adopters) for a matter of weeks. However, this does not necessarily stop families from making a return trip with their children and the child of this one returning family to China had only been living with them for approximately a year before they made the trip when the child was only about two years of age. Also, there were children adopted from other countries who had been living with their new families for several years and they had still not made a return trip. Two examples of this is the four children adopted from Romania who had been with their families for a number of years and yet only one family (17) had made a return trip. Also, the two oldest children in the sample (aged fourteen years and eighteen years) (21), who had been adopted from Sri Lanka, had not made a return trip.

6.3.1 Non-returning families

As can be seen from the previous section there were thirteen families who had made return trips to their children's country of origin leaving a total of eighteen families who had not, at the time of the interview, made a return trip. Explanations why families had not returned to their children's birth country varied. For some families there were practical reasons why they had not returned. There were families who had only recently adopted their children so it was too early for them to be thinking of returning. Others said they could not afford a return trip at the present time, but for some it was a belief that such trips were not necessary or at least not necessary until the children were older.

One of the families who had not returned (02) had adopted two girls, one from Sri Lanka and most recently a daughter from China. Unlike many overseas adopters this was not a family with a high income. The cost of having adopted twice from overseas meant that they did not have the financial resources at the present time, to make a return trip to either country but they had not ruled out returning in the future. Similarly the family who had adopted from Peru (23) pointed out that they had no plans to make a return trip. The reason they gave for this was that since the adoption of their child from Peru they had had

three birth children and the cost of taking the whole family to Peru would be beyond their financial means. However, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter 8, it is apparent that neither of these families was amongst those that have an active interest in the culture of their children's birth country. Therefore, it could be suggested that it is because these families do not feel it is important for their children to learn about the culture of their birth country that the expense of such a trip is seen as beyond their means at the present time.

Two families who had adopted from Romania (20, 30) explained that they had no plans to return because they felt that there was nothing in Romania for their children to return for. Both of the children had spent their early years in Romanian orphanages and one had been there until the age of eight years when he was adopted and came to Britain. The mother of this boy felt that despite having been in England for approximately four years, he needed more time to settle and to come to terms to the poor conditions he had experienced for so many years in Romania.

The family whose children were the oldest in the sample (a 14-year-old and 18-year-old) had not returned and they had no plans to make such a trip in the near future (21). As well as having no plans to return to Sri Lanka they appeared to be ambivalent about the advantages of such a visit. The parents suggested that neither of their children had shown any real interest in returning to their birth country and they suggested returns trips were something to be done when their children were adults and more emotionally mature. However, during the interview the subject of returning to Sri Lanka and possibly tracing birth parents was raised. The adoptive parents were very surprised when the fourteen-year-old stated he wanted to trace his birth mother as soon as he was old enough to go over to Sri Lanka to do this. The parents challenged him about this and asked why he wanted to do this but his only response was a shrug of his shoulders and they commented that this was the first they had heard him voice this intention.

6.4 When is the Right Time to Make a Return Trip?

When to return to the birth country was a concern for all adopters and there was a considerable degree of agreement that during puberty and adolescence it could be problematic, but going when the children were very young would mean the children may not remember much about the trip. Therefore, a typical response about when they might consider returning came from a recent adopter from Guatemala:

"I think it will probably be when she is eight. We'll go back because before eight I don't think she'd remember. After eight it might be too much of a shock for her. Like in puberty when they are emotionally disturbed (laughs), unbalanced, you know what they are like! I wouldn't like to confront her with it all but I think going back when she's eight, giving her a holiday and letting her just absorb it she'll grow up with it. I mean we have got Guatemalan stuff all over the house, stuck on walls etc. She has got a Guatemalan doll. So I don't think it will be a surprise for her." (07)

Also, as one parent explained they did not want their children to be at an age where they might fall in love whilst away on the trip because this would, 'screw them up no end.' One family (22) whose birth son had travelled to Sri Lanka with them when they had collected their two adopted daughters felt they needed to take his age and needs into consideration. They wanted the trip to be at a time when he still had an interest in travelling with the family but not during a critical period in his education. As it worked out the timing of the their return trip took place when their adopted daughters were eight years of age, very close to the age the brother was when he first visited Sri Lanka when the girls were adopted. The parents liked the idea that each of their children's first impressions of Sri Lanka would be happening at a very similar age. They were aware of what their son had got out of his first trip to Sri Lanka and what he had enjoyed and understood and, over the years, since the trip, how much he had remembered.

An alternative response about the right time to return to the country of origin came from the family adopting from Brazil (25). They felt that the decision had to come from the children and this could only be when they were old enough to make such decisions. Their children, at the time of the interview, were aged 7 and 8 years, and returning, as a

family was something they had not, up to that point, considered and had always felt the initiative would come from the children. They did comment that at the present time their son appeared to have very little interest in Brazil whereas their daughter took pride in being Brazilian.

The young girl adopted from El Salvador (11), currently thirteen years of age, was present during the interview and her mother, for the benefit of the interviewer asked her, whether she would like to return to El Salvador and she responded by saying:

"Don't know because I don't really know too much about El Salvador. I know where it is. When I was younger I got a bit curious and I looked in this book of flags and looked up where El Salvador was. I found out a little bit but I am not too desperate to find out. I was just curious at about six." (11)

The mother elaborated and said that in the past she had given her daughter the option of going to El Salvador for a holiday but she had chosen to go elsewhere instead. The mother felt that there was plenty of time to visit El Salvador when her daughter wanted to and it was not important that they went there in the immediate future.

As with the two families above who had been unable to return to their children's birth countries for financial reasons, for one family (29) the timing of their return to Ecuador was influenced by financial considerations. They commented that they were unsure if there was a 'right time' to return. However, they knew that once their children reached twelve years of age they would have to pay full fare on the aeroplane, therefore they made their return visit when the children were aged nine and ten years:

"We thought about going before they reached puberty and other sorts of fantasy type ways of thinking came in. At eight or nine they were still very open. Younger than that they wouldn't remember and older than that you getting into other interests." (29)

The purpose of the return trip for two families (15, 25) had been to finalise a second adoption and not for their children to experience the culture of the country. The family who had taken their daughter to Guatemala when they adopted for a second time explained that they felt that despite their daughter remembering little about the trip, because she was only three years of age, they had wanted her to be a part of the second adoption:

"I think it was important for her to feel part of it (adoption) and she was so excited. She told everyone at school that she was going to bring him home. Everyone knew about it. So I think it was nice for us to all go there." (15)

Therefore, the motive for the return visit had not been for the daughter to experience Guatemala (her birth country) but for her to be involved in the second adoption. As with second children born into families, parents are warned not to allow the first child to feel 'pushed out' and rejected by what was happening. These parents were, however, sure they would make a return trip to Guatemala in the future and this time the trip would be for the benefit of both of their children giving them the opportunity to learn about, and experience Guatemala. However, they were unsure about when the right time would be for such a trip. The parents had always talked to their children about being adopted from Guatemala but they did not feel that at their present ages (3 and 6 years), the children really understood what this meant. They also commented that the children did not seem to have a lot of interest in Guatemala at this point in time. They hoped that any future trips would combine learning about Guatemala culture and a reunion with the birth families of both the children.

6.5 Adoptive Parents' Reasons for Returning

A number of reasons for returning to the children's countries were identified throughout the interviews both by the parents who had returned and those who were thinking about this as something they might do in the future. These included, experiencing the country 'first hand', understanding and learning about the culture, having a holiday and learning more about the country and trying to understand about poverty.

6.5.1 Understanding pressures on families in China

The daughter of the family returning to China (09) was less than three years old at the time of the trip and she had only been living with the family for about a year. The parents had found the return visit a positive experience and hoped to make it a bi-annual trip. The mother gave a full account about why she felt regular visits back to China were important for their daughter's future understanding of China. The mother was also keen that as her daughter grows up she gains an understanding about the impact of the One Child Policy⁸⁵ and ensuing pressure on families, who had children beyond the allowed quota:

"... the whole business of the Chinese economy which has brought the One Child Policy and all the problems, isn't going to be easy for them to understand if they have never been there." (09)

The mother acknowledged that any explanations her daughter was given would be from what she described as a 'western eye', adding that this would also be the child's eye because she will not have known any other life. During their return trip to China it was explained that extreme examples of poverty would be seen. The mother felt that:

"If she went back every couple of years she would see the poverty. The working people don't have a lot, so obviously when she goes out, when she sees the ordinary people, she is going to see them working hard and not having very much. I suppose the more we travel she is going to see how bad China is but she is then going to realise, hopefully, that the Chinese government are doing the best they can, having the One Child Policy." (09)

It seems unlikely that a child of three years of age would be able to link levels of poverty and the need for the One Child Policy. This would be a big step for any child to take and more especially such a young child. However, the mother felt sure that over the years, and several return trips later, her daughter would begin to understand what she saw and

⁸⁵ A policy in China since 1978 aimed at reducing population growth by limiting the number of children in each family.

what she was experiencing in China. During this and future visits to China her daughter would see for herself what life was like over there, this would include examples of extreme poverty, and the possibility of seeing both adults and children begging. This, the mother suggested, would allow her daughter to understand more fully why the One Child Policy had been introduced, and why there was a need to find ways of improving standards of living for the whole population.

The family was in the process of adopting a second child from China and intended to take both girls back to China as often as they could. The impact of adopting from China on the mother at least, because she was the one being interviewed, had made her actively take an interest in China, Chinese culture and Chinese politics. She had made a point of finding out more about the One Child Policy to help her understand the impact this was having on families in China and why so many female babies were being abandoned. She also felt that making regular visits to China was the best way to learn about the 'real' China. Their daughter(s) and themselves could learn together.

6.5.2 Returning to the orphanage

The mother in the previous section also explained that as well as gaining a better understanding of the economic situation in China after their trip over there, other preconceived ideas about China and the Chinese people might have to be re-evaluated. She gave the example about how she felt after watching the television programme 'The Dying Rooms' (Woods and Blewett 1995). The unforgettable images of babies tied to potty chairs and starving toddlers left dying alone, left her feeling that the Chinese were uncaring and did not want their own children and this was the reason so many were being abandoned and were living in institutions. The mother felt it was important that they, the parents, and their daughter see for themselves what it was like in China rather than relying on dramatic television programmes for their information. She also placed a lot of emphasis on the importance of, and the benefits of regular visits back to China:

“Our daughter is going to see this kind of thing when she gets older and I think it’s going to bring home the point to her that maybe her real birth mother did her a kindness, in a way, because if she couldn’t afford to feed her, couldn’t afford to keep her, isn’t it better that she took her somewhere where she would be found and taken to the orphanage where there was a chance to be adopted rather than sitting begging at the road side or living in squalor.” (09)

Here we have a complex train of thought with all sorts of negative and positive perceptions of China being given. The adoptive mother appears sure birth mothers do not set off with the intention of giving away their babies, rather it is circumstance which dictate their actions. However, this was done at the expense of negative accounting about the Chinese economy with inferences about high levels of abject poverty. There is also the possibility that such sights will give their daughter a negative impression about China and what it means to be Chinese. The main problem with this line of argument about ‘going to see how *bad* China is’ (emphasis added) is the implication that China is ‘bad’ and therefore their daughter has been very lucky to get away. This is the ‘double-bind’ many parents can find themselves in when trying to give their children explanations about why they have been adopted. In this case it is the Chinese government and the inadequacies of their policies. Also, this conversation was taking place in front of the child, who would not have been old enough to fully understand what was being said but one day she will.

Another family (17) that had returned to the orphanage where their daughter explained that they felt the visit had helped her to come to terms with some of her pre-adoption experiences. The following section outlines the mother’s rationalization about their return trip to Romania.

6.5.3 Coming to terms with pre-adoption experiences

The family returned to Romania with their daughter (17) when she was nine years of age. They had considered going the previous year but decided she was not sufficiently mature and would not be able to articulate her feelings as much as might be necessary. The

parents felt it was important that when they went back to Romania their daughter was able to talk to them about her feelings both during and after the trip. The mother explained their motive for the return visit:

"It's better to know what it's like than to imagine. Either imagine it was much better than it was or imagine it was much worse than it was." (17)

The mother deemed the trip a success but as she explained it had been very traumatic for all the family. She went on to describe the visit to the orphanage where their daughter had lived prior to being adopted:

"We walked into that room, and although she had no language when she came to us [for adoption], she remembered she had been there and she, she, she just stood there and tears were just rolling down her cheeks. Normally she makes a hell of a row when she cries, but she was just silently weeping and she came to me and said, 'get me out of here, now!' (17)

They did leave and after a break they talked together about how she had felt when she entered into the room where she had lived years earlier and after about half an hour she told her mother that she felt 'as though I was trapped and couldn't get out'. The mother vividly describes how she felt it must have been for her daughter:

"Just think, in her body somewhere in her body, it's stored through the smell, through the atmosphere, through the sounds of Romanian women speaking, through the crying of the babies, through the sound of the kids rocking in the cots and she felt trapped and couldn't get out. That was obviously how she felt when she was in there." (17)

This was one of the most intense accounts of returning to a child's birth country and clearly illustrates how potentially emotional visits can be for both parents and children. The family have since been working with their daughter to acknowledge that she has a right to be angry about what happened to her and hope that little by little she will be able to come to terms with 'who she is and where she comes from'.

This account contrasts with that given by an Italian adopter at the Best of Both Worlds Conference in Dublin (February 2003) where the family had taken their daughter back to the Russian orphanage where she had lived prior to the adoption. They had found the experience positive and felt that the visit had been beneficial to their daughter (Miliotti 2003). It was also different from the account from the family returning to China (9) and who visited their daughter's orphanage. They had not recalled the experience as being negative. However, the purpose of that visit had been to gather information and not for their daughter to relive her past or to see where she had once lived.

6.5.4 Maintaining links with the foster family

The family who had adopted from Chile had spent many months there during the protracted adoption process (described in more detail in Chapter 4) and lasting friendships had been made. For this family, one of the main reasons for returning to Chile had been to renew friendships. The family who had fostered their daughter during this extended adoption period had not been professional carers but the foster mother was the secretary of the lawyer handling the case:

"She loves babies and her last baby was two and a half at the time Rose was born so she was asked if she wanted to look after another baby. So Rose lived with this family for nearly three years." (19)

This experience serves as a good example about how relationships in countries of origin can develop and be sustained. During the time it took to complete the adoption the adoptive father phoned every single week to see how the child was getting along and how the case was progressing, if at all. Several visits to Chile had taken place during this period and on two of these visits the prospective adopters stayed with the foster mother's mother and thus getting to know the extended foster family. Having little idea of how long the adoption was going to take, the prospective adoptive mother made the decision to go over and live in Chile for as long as it took for the case to be finalised. The case itself took over two years and the adoptive mother's stay was for a duration of six months. Good relationships have been maintained since the completion of the adoption

and members of the foster family have visited the UK and during the two visits to Chile the foster parents, ‘shower Rose with cuddly toys every time we go.’ (19)

One of the families who had adopted three girls from Guatemala had maintained links with the foster family who had cared for two of their daughters prior to adoption but in this case it had been the foster mother visiting the UK rather than the family going over to Guatemala. However, it was the family’s intention that when the three girls were a little older they would visit Guatemala and see where they had lived with the foster mother.

6.6 Reaction from People in the Child’s Birth Country

Several families felt uncertain how they would be accepted when they returned to their children’s country of origin. For all the families in this study who returned to their child’s birth country the appearance of the parents and the children differed in that the parents were light skinned and the children were dark skinned i.e. they were an ethnically mixed family. Therefore, when they were in the child’s birth country it was obvious to anyone they met that the child was not their birth child. However, parents did not want people to think they had ‘stolen’ their children, that they had ‘bought’ their children or any other negative perceptions about themselves as parents.

During the interview with one of the families who had returned to Sri Lanka (28) there was some discussion about how they felt their son would be accepted/perceived in Sri Lanka because he would be English by culture but looking like a Sri Lankan. They said this had been brought home to them one day when they had met a young Sri Lankan girl who had been born in England but was preparing to visit Sri Lanka for the first time. The young girl wanted to make the trip because she wanted to learn more about Sri Lanka; to find out for herself what was it to be Sri Lankan. They spent some time telling her what Sri Lanka was like and about their trips over there. They explained how this role reversal

'felt a bit bizarre' because under different circumstances they would have expected that they would have been the one asking her about Sri Lanka and what they should expect when they went over there. They enjoyed talking to her but have since regretted that they did not think to get an address or contact details from her so they could find out how her visit had gone. They felt that her experiences would have been very similar to those their son was likely to encounter if he ever decided to return to Sri Lanka in the future as a young adult.

During this interview the parents retold a story about an incident that had happened on one of their return trips to Sri Lanka. One day the family was out flying a kite when a Sri Lankan came up to them and struck up a conversation and they were rather perturbed when he said:

"I am a very poor man and you are very rich and I have five children. If you give me two hundred dollars you can have one of my children. Look we all benefit. You would benefit because you would have a child. The child would benefit because the child would have an education and clothing and everything. It was a bit of a shock to think that someone was as poor as that." (28)

This rather extreme example gives a clear indication that not only is adoption not frowned upon but is seen as a positive way to achieve a better life for the adopted child and for family members who are left behind. However, the buying and selling of children in such a manner is not deemed acceptable by authorities of any country.

The family adopting from and returning to Ecuador with their two daughters expressed their concern about what their reception might be in their daughter's birth country:

"Everybody around here is really pleased and happy but the authorities [Social Service Department] were so against it all we thought going back we might experience the same thing but from the moment we arrived it was just, 'oh aren't they lucky'. That is what they kept saying, 'aren't they lucky'. 'Haven't they got an opportunity?' It was a wonderful experience and we were made welcome by everybody we met in Ecuador. Our daughters have been able to ask about their birth parents and were able to begin to understand about their roots. They talked about being in 'their country' but they referred to England as 'their home'." (29)

However, the father, talking about his family's return trip to Brazil (26), was quick to point out that any doubts he and his wife may have had about being accepted back by the Brazilians was quickly dismissed upon arrival in Brazil. The father was unsure whether Brazilians they met would approve of them adopting their son and taking him to live in England. During their visit they had nothing but positive reactions from people they met:

"We never got anything other than very positive responses from anyone who was told we were adopting. They knew the problems around them walking along, you are accosted every ten yards by kids selling things or just asking for food. They are very aware of the real problem of the homeless. Very happy about it and said, 'lucky boy, lucky boy.' It was one less child in misery. So no one ever expressed anything negative about the adoption at all." (26)

Overall the parents, after initial doubts, only had positive stories to tell about the reactions of the people in their children's birth countries.

6.7 Reactions of the Adopted Children to the Return Trips

As with the family mentioned earlier who returned to China (09), each of the families returning to Sri Lanka commented that they were worried about their children's reaction to the poverty they were undoubtedly going to see:

"I didn't expect to see it myself but all along the road from the airport there were beggars lining the road. And if you have just landed at the airport you would be well advised not to walk to your hotel. The safest place to be is in a vehicle because these beggars were waiting for tourists. A very unusual sight to see beggars lining the side of the road. It was rather traumatic - traumatic situation. And there were beggars all over the place, everywhere you go you see beggars." (10)

One family commented that they had not discussed the possibility of seeing high levels of poverty with their children prior to the trip and that as a consequence this may have made the experience more disturbing for them:

"We didn't talk in front of them [the children] because it is just so painful but they really suffered when out in Sri Lanka. We saw some people who were at the bottom of the social heap. Anybody facing third world poverty for the first time is rocked."
(22)

However, parents can never be certain how their children will react when they see people begging in the street for the first time or see the poor living standards of people in some of the sending countries. One family (22) who had two daughters of very similar age noted how each of the girls, aged eight years at the time of the trip to Sri Lanka, reacted differently. One of their daughters took one quick look out of the bus window on the way from the airport to their hotel and then spent the rest of the journey with her face turned into the bus. Yet, their other daughter could not take her eyes away from the window and the sights she was seeing. It affected them both in different ways - or their coping mechanisms were different:

"We didn't see the worst of the slums but it was worse than we had ever seen. And that's a difficult thing to know how to cope with."(22)

When parents have tried to give their children positive images of Sri Lanka and the first thing they see upon arrival is beggars it is difficult for both the parents and the children. From these accounts it seemed that some of the children appeared to take the poverty and the beggars in their stride and gave the impression they had not even noticed anything untoward, where others were clearly distressed by it all.

Overall return visits were seen as having had advantages and disadvantages. As one father commented, 'the trip had been good but too good, because the kids now think Sri Lanka is all international class hotels, swimming pools and an awful lot of fun' (14). Many parents wanted to make their visit more of cultural trip seeing as many of the sights as possible but it was felt the children would get bored and they did not want 'discontented children' (10). It was clear that for many families such trips highlight two sides of Sri Lanka (and other countries of origin), one being wealthy as epitomised by the four star hotels many families stayed in, and the other poverty with beggars and slums.

However, there were parents who felt that their children, despite most of their time being spent in the hotel having fun, had noticed poorer aspects of their birth country. One father noted that his eldest son was one of those who had seen that there were a 'lot of people who were not very well off' (14). Generally, most of the children seemed disinterested in learning about cultural aspects of Sri Lanka and overall the trip was described as:

"One gigantic two week party. We thought this was the best way first of all. First of all they should know or begin to know something about the place and that it should be a favourable impression." (14)

Parents did not seem concerned that the children had taken little interest in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan people, that they had not been absorbing the culture; had not toured around and not seen the countryside. However, for the three families that returned to Sri Lanka together what they experienced was a group trip amongst fellow adopters and adoptees. They felt comfortable about not having to explain their domestic situation and for the children their first memories of Sri Lanka would have been positive ones. It could also be suggested that having been to their birth country once they may feel encouraged returning for a second visit when they are older.

A significant aspect of the return visit to her birth country for one young girl (aged nine years) had been that she had not enjoyed having people stare at her all the time and how self-conscious this had made her feel:

"Walking round with two white parents was conspicuous." (27)

It is difficult to know why the young girl felt so self-conscious with two white parents back in Sri Lanka when her father did not report that this was a problem when they were in England. It was possible that the parents were the ones who were made more aware of the differences between them and their daughter because they were now in the minority

during their stay in Sri Lanka. When at home in the UK they possibly felt more comfortable because they were part of the majority population and having a daughter who was a different colour was an easier position for them to be in. Alternatively their daughter may have been self-conscious in Sri Lanka because she was the only child there with white parents and other children around her were with people who were the same colour as themselves.

This is different to reports from older adoptees about how they have felt during time spent in their birth country when, for the first time they are one of the majority and felt that people were not noticing them because of their different looks (Jardine 2000; von Melen 1998,). In the case above it may have been the age of the child (nine years) at the time of the visit which is younger than respondents in von Melen's study and younger than Sue Jardine was when she made her return trip. She may have felt self-conscious because being with her white parents, who were in the minority and attracting stares, made her uncomfortable. Despite enjoying being able to blend in with the majority population for possibly the first time in their lives adoptees have been reported as finding it difficult when they are spoken to and they are unable to understand and unable to reply (Freundlich and Lieberthal 2000, Kim 2003).

Two families reported general problems about their return trips. One of the daughters of the family returning to Ecuador upon landing demanded that, 'I want to go home'. The parents put this down to the fact that the airport was noisy and boisterous and the taxi drivers were all on the concourse shouting in Spanish for them to use their taxi. Purposefully the family had decided to stay in the same hotel as they had stayed in when they had been there to collect the girls but by coincidence they were put into the same rooms. A large part of this interview consisted of talking with the girls about the trip back to Ecuador and looking through their album of photographs. It transpired that the girls did not like Ecuadorian food and they explained that Ecuadorians eat guinea pigs and generally in Ecuador they eat lots of chicken in the form they described as a sort of soup/stew/broth along with rice as an accompaniment:

“Their cuisine is very bland and it’s very limited cause they’ve got so many influences from all round the world you can eat every cuisine in Quito. You can eat French, Italian, Spanish but if you want to eat Ecuadorian you only do it once.” (29)

The early experiences of the family returning to Brazil (26) were very similar to those described above in that their son’s first impression of his birth country was not very positive:

“He hated the flight because he was sick. It was too hot. He didn’t like the heat. Didn’t like the food. Couldn’t understand what anyone was saying. It was then we realised he’s a British child and we have got to stop all this nonsense about remembering your cultural roots and all that. Anyone who is brought up in Britain, it doesn’t matter where they are from they are British and their point of reference will be British. Culture is something you acquire, I think. It’s not something that is in your genes. So keeping in touch with your cultural roots is, I think, a bit of a blind alley.” (26)

However, what was significant was that the return trip had highlighted how ‘British’ the boy was and how alienated he was towards the Brazilian part of himself. The father did not see this as problematic and raised doubts about the importance people place on the need to find ones ‘roots’. As the father said, ‘culture is something you acquire’ but he did not appear to see that his son could have ‘acquired’ some Brazilian culture during the visit.

6.8 Summary and Discussion

In total thirteen families, over one third, had returned to their children’s birth country, the remaining eighteen families have not, to date, made such a journey. The main reason given for not returning was that the family was waiting until the children were older or until the children themselves asked about making such a trip. This does raise the question as to whether parents are opting out of taking their children back to their birth country and are they hoping the children will not ask to be taken back? However, experiences from other countries that have larger number of overseas adoptions return

trips have not usually been for adoptees as young as those in this study group. 'Homeland tours' as they are often referred to in the American literature have been for young adult adoptees who would return as part of a group visit which may or may not include their parents. Finally there were families who had not seriously given much consideration to making a return trip. This may have been because they had only recently adopted and it was felt to be too soon for them to be thinking about returning. There were one or two families who found the cost of adopting from overseas had stretched their financial resources to the extreme which meant they were unable to afford to make a return trip for quite some time. It would be interesting to re-visit all the non-returning families in the future to see whether any of them had since made return trips and whether any of the trips were prompted by requests from the children.

The accounts of the parents raise a number of questions including, 'Are early return trips to the birth country useful for the children?' 'Are parents hoping that such trips lay the foundation for future visits and possible reunions with members of their children's birth family?' Or are parents hoping the children will be satisfied with what they see and experience on the trip and not want to go back again? Finally, and most importantly, 'what was the purpose of the trip?' Yngvesson (2003) when discussing return visits of older adoptees, raised similar questions when she asked whether returning to the birth country was one of the final stages of the adoption journey for adoptees - a 'completion', a 'journey towards wholeness'? Alternatively, it could be asked whether the return trip is just the beginning of the adoptees renewed relationship with their birth country?

It seems that the age of the adoptees when they return to their birth country is a major factor. Most of the literature from the USA is about trips made by older adoptees (adolescents or young adults) whereas the accounts in this study have been from families whose children have all been pre-teenagers. Therefore, a major consideration for the parents had been deciding what was the right age to make a return trip. Contrary to the policy of the Italian adoption agency (CIAI) where children had to have been living with their new families for a minimum of five years before they could join one of their

organised return trips, the families in this study were more concerned about the actual age of the children and not how long they had been with their family. Most of the returning parents in this study seemed to prefer that the children were relatively young when they returned to their birth country for the first time and none wanted to make the trip during the child's adolescence. There was a sense that adolescence would be a difficult period when there would be many issues of a general nature that would have to be managed. Parents did not imagine that returning to the birth country would be beneficial to the children during that period of their lives and the trip would most likely raise a number of additional problems. However, it is difficult to decide, without further questioning, whether the parents were more concerned about their own needs or the needs of the children. It could be suggested that the parents had a need to be in control of how involved their children became in their birth country during the visits over there. Parents did speak about their concern that their children might become emotionally involved with someone in their birth country if they went during adolescence i.e. fall in love.

Goldberg (1997) in her study found that parents who had adopted from Romania had wanted to convey their own positive experiences during their time in Romania. This might be the same for parents in this study who may have wanted to reinforce to their children how much they themselves respected the children's birth country and the interest they had in the country. It was most likely that during the actual trip there would be several opportunities for parents and children to talk together about adoption related issues and as with all holidays, it would be natural to reflect back on them and share memories. This type of openness between parents and adoptees about adoption and the birth country would help in the future if adoptees consider making a second trip to their birth country. Having made one trip and feeling comfortable talking to their parents may pave the way for adoptees to make a second return trip to their birth country and this time possibly for the purpose of making a search for their birth relatives.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Searching for information about birth relatives and searching for birth relatives is the topic of Chapter 7.

All returning parents were pleasantly surprised at the positive response of people they met in the birth country during their visits. Many parents had been concerned about how they would be accepted as a family and whether there would be a negative reaction about them having adopted a child and taken them to live in the UK. Freundlich and Lieberthal (2000) in their postal survey of one hundred and sixty seven Korean adoptees between the ages of 21 - 47 years old⁸⁷ found that fifty seven percent had previously made a return trip to Korea. Almost half of those making a return trip had found the experience very positive and many of the positive comments had been about meeting Korean people whom they found to be welcoming and friendly. However, just less than a quarter described at least one negative experience during their stay in Korea and these related to responses of Koreans they met during their visit. Some spoke about, 'silent reverse discrimination - pity and ambivalence', whilst others commented that they had, 'been looked down upon because I didn't speak Korean', and another found 'the Korean's attitude towards adoption offensive'. It is unclear how old the adoptees were in the Freundlich and Lieberthal study⁸⁸ but it is likely that they were older than the adoptees in this current study who had returned with their parents and were no older than twelve years of age.

The parents spoke about their concern regarding the poverty their children were seeing during their visits and there was a range of reactions from the children. There were children who did their best to ignore such sights by turning to look the other way, there were those who were visibly upset by what they saw and there were some who appeared unconcerned. Parents found themselves in the difficult position of trying to give their children adequate explanations about why the country had such poverty without seeming to be too critical of the country and the people. They had to take care not to give negative impressions about the country otherwise it would be difficult for their children to have feelings of pride about belonging to their birth country and its culture.

⁸⁷ Adopted from Korea between the years 1956-1985.

⁸⁸ Most American agency-sponsored return visits are for adolescents and young adults.

Several parents commented about the importance of their children enjoying the first return visit to their birth country and it was apparent that this was often at the expense of learning less about the country's culture. Despite most of the return trips being more about having a fun holiday than about learning the culture of their birth country what the children will have experienced is the atmosphere of the country. They would have eaten the food (possibly), heard the language spoken continually for the first time, smelt the smells of the country (Yngvesson 2003) and there would be a number of other subtle facets of the country they would subconsciously absorb. It is therefore difficult to comment about whether parents should have made a greater effort to see more of the traditional culture of their children's birth country. Kim (2003), writing about a ten-day return visit to Korea organised by the Korean government in 2001, notes that the main purpose was to help overseas adoptees to 'begin to feel the breath of Korea's rich culture'. On the trip were thirty adoptees from the USA, Europe and Australia whose ages ranged from sixteen to thirty four years (older than the children in this sample group). Activities included visits to ancient palaces and courses on Korean 'traditional' food and customs but they were discouraged from experiencing contemporary urban South Korean life. As with the Freundlich and Lieberthal (2000) study there was a vast range of responses about the benefits they had gained from the trip. Kim (2003) puts these differences down to the diversity of the lives of the adoptees since the time of their adoption. A number of other variables in their personal histories including those of class, race, gender as well as religion, and generation that each has an influence on adoptees' reactions to such return trips (p59).

In conclusion there are a whole series of factors influencing when or whether adoptees make a return trip to their birth country. During childhood decisions are made by parents and it is them who decide whether they visit their birth country but as the children move into adulthood they will be the ones who have a choice about whether they return to their birth country or not. However, as noted by Kim, above, these decisions will be influenced by differences in personal histories and life experiences since the adoption. These could include differences in attitude shown by parents towards the birth country and how much adoptees have been encouraged to feel it is a 'natural' thing to want to do.

It could also be suggested that personal histories and life experiences prior to the adoption would influence decisions about whether adoptees want to make a return visit to their birth country.

It was apparent during the interview that few parents had been given guidance during their home study assessment about whether or when they should consider making a return trip. Certainly there was no support available for families who wanted to make a trip and who were uncertain how to organise one or were unsure about the focus of the visit i.e. holiday, revisit the orphanage, visit foster family, tracing the birth family, cultural excursions or other alternatives. As there are no agencies in the UK with mediation links to agencies in the sending countries families have to 'go it alone', unlike other countries where families can return as part of a group with the support of professionals.⁸⁹ None of the families in this study had taken part in an adoption preparation class which has become the norm for all domestic adoptions and for some overseas adoption in the UK today. During preparation classes would be an ideal time to discuss the positive and negative aspects of returning to the sending country. Many families who adopt from overseas, who have attended preparation classes have been disappointed because the classes have been for both domestic and overseas adoption and consequently not enough time has been spent on issues unique to overseas adoption (Selman and Mason 2003).

One of the main policy recommendations could be that attendance on preparation courses should be compulsory as in The Netherlands. The opportunities offered parents during these courses to discuss with professionals and each other their concerns about a wide range of issues would appear to be invaluable. Some of the worries parents have about when to return to their child's birth country, what the purpose of the trip should be and what are the benefits for themselves and their children as they grow up could be examined at this time. The Overseas Adoption Helpline (OAH) currently offers such

⁸⁹ Chapter 10 looks in more detail about supporting families and alternative methods of delivering support services.

courses but there a number of problems most of which relate to the location, timing and number of courses offered. In a similar way that all the parent support groups are based in the south of England the majority of the courses offered by OAH are held in the south of the country and rarely get farther north than the Midlands. As with so many other aspects of overseas adoption, whilst the numbers continue to be small it is difficult to imagine the likelihood of having enough adopters to organise preparation classes on a regular basis in several different parts of the country. If such courses were made compulsory further delays would result, making an already long, slow process, as outlined in chapter 4, even longer and slower. It is unlikely that any of the parents in this study would have welcomed anything that would have caused additional delays in the adoption process even if the benefits of preparation classes was explained to them. However, this should not be a reason why such courses should not be considered as a necessary part of the adoption process as it is in domestic adoption. What does need to be addressed the question of why there appears to be inherent delays at different stages of the process.

Finally, return trips to the children's birth country are but one part of the search for origins. The search for origins and a sense of identity has been described as consisting of an inner and an outer search (Irhammer and Cederblad 1999, 2000). The outer search is the part of the search that is translated in to action of which the return trip to the birth country can be a part. The following chapters will consider in more detail parent's role in the adoption journey and the development of their cultural identity. Chapter 7 will examine a second aspect of the outer search and parents' views about searching for their children's birth family and how they see this being relevant to their children's sense of identity. The chapters in part four looks at how parents help their children's inner search for a sense of identity that is compatible with their cultural heritage and their lives in the UK.

Chapter 7: Parent's Knowledge about and Contact with their Child's Birth Family

7.1 Introduction

As can be seen in chapter five concerning how parents tell their children about their origins it is apparent that most adoptive parents struggle with their handling of the lack of biological connections and information they have about their children. However, what is also certain is that somewhere there is another family with whom the children have links. From time to time questions will be raised about birth families and there will be thoughts around whether to try to find out more about the birth family with the possibility of future 'reconnections'. However, it cannot be denied that there are adoptive parents who take comfort in the fact that the birthparents are far away and difficult to trace and therefore pose no threat to their family. If there is no acknowledgement that the birth parents are part of the children's lives there is a danger the children will take on a fantasy reality of their own making.

In many societies today identity is often thought of as being based on broad social phenomena which includes one's family of origin (Strathern 1992, Telfer 1999) and as Jenkins notes, one of the most important elements of how one sees oneself is based on kinship (Jenkins 1996 p64). Kin-group membership is important because it locates individuals within a social field independent of and beyond the individual. Therefore, being able to identify with kin members allows individuals to establish relationships of similarity with descendents and, at the same time differentiates between kin and non-kin group membership. Identity based on kinship membership establishes relations of similarity with fellow kin in terms of descent, differentiating the individual from non-kin and is likely to be a significant part of selfhood. It could also be suggested that under certain circumstances kinship membership may have more significance outside the family group than within it because within the family such relationships are generally 'taken for granted' relationships.

However, in an adoption situation the extent to which adoptees can create a sense of identity that is based on kinship is particularly problematic, because they have to base their identity on 'the concept of two sets of parents' (Triseliotis 1973, Telfer 1999).

Bartholet (1993a) suggest that much of the language surrounding adoption regularly reinforces the message that real parenting is linked by blood and that only genetically related parents are truly entitled to possess their children and by implication, non-genetically related parents are mere substitutes for the real thing. Such language is bound to impact on both parents and children about the importance of the biological parents and the need to re-connect with them.

March (1995) suggests one reason adoptees search for members of their birth family is because of their sense of being incomplete and being unable to fully integrate their biological background information into their identity structure. She also reports that some adoptees describe situations where they found themselves unable to answer questions about their backgrounds and this intensifies their feelings of difference and they experience a sense of being stigmatized by negative assumptions about adoption. March draws on Goffman's (1969) work about stigma and the management of 'spoiled identity' in which he writes about 'differentness' and suggests that once a label of difference has been attached to a person or a situation there is the potential for both discrimination and stigmatization. In the case of adoption it is the ambiguous lineage and lack of social legitimacy in the parent-child relationship (Kressierer and Bryant 1996) that can cause problems but one way to neutralize this social stigma is for adoptees to search for their biological family. Not only does search and reunion reduce levels of social stigma, as suggested by March (1995), but it also relieves adoptees feelings of being 'incomplete' (Telfer 1999). However, it must not be assumed that all adoptees have such feelings of being 'incomplete' or acknowledge there is any social stigma attached to their adoptee status and according to Brottveit (1999) even amongst adoptees searching for their birth families there is a lack of similarity about the meaning of the search and why they have

embarked on a search. He goes on to point out that it was also not clear why adoptees who possessed a considerable amount of information about their birth parents were just as likely to undertake a reunion as those with little or no information about their family of origin. There have been earlier studies of domestic adoption that have shown that adoptees' interest in their biological origin is related to openness of the child's adoptive family along with an acknowledgement of the difference between the adoptive and biological kinship (Triseliotis 1973, Kirk 1981, Grotevant et al 1994).

7.2 Parents' Views about Searching for Birth Relatives

In the previous chapter we looked at parent's thoughts about returning to the child's birth country and the purpose of these trips from the parents' perspective. For many parents a return trip was to allow their children to experience their birth country and to learn about the culture of the country. Other parents returned for a second adoption and for a small number an additional purpose was to trace birth relatives and birth mothers in particular. However, for families adopting from China this was likely to be difficult, if not impossible, because all the children had been abandoned with very little identifiable information available either to the Chinese authorities or to the adoptive parents. In other sending countries both the quantity and quality of record keeping varies considerably and will impact on any future searches.

Most parents had been given a limited amount of information about the birth mother at the time of the adoption but those adopting from Sri Lanka, Latin America, and the USA had met the mother at some time during their stay in the country of origin. The range of information varied from social worker reports about the mother, some parents had photographs of the mother taken at the time of the adoption, and one adoptive mother (11) had travelled with the birth mother on a bus from El Salvador (place of adoption) to Guatemala.

One of the families adopting from China (03) when discussing the possibility of tracing birth relatives acknowledged that for a person to know about their origins was important but, at the same time they were aware that because of the situation in China the chance of their child being able to find her birth family was slight:

“Obviously it’s important (tracing) but whether or not we can achieve it is another matter. It might be a case of trying to work with her to find the information out but it might be we don’t find it out. We would love to know about her birth family, we really would.” (03)

But what they were keen to emphasise was that they did not feel threatened by the presence of other parents:

“We love her so much we don’t have a problem, we don’t have a negative view about her birth mother at all. We understand about China and the mother has done the kindest thing she could and she has obviously made us very, very happy. I would love to find out more if we can but that is probably for the future.” (03)

7.2.1 Timing of a search for birth relatives

Some parents felt that the matter of tracing and possible reunions was something that should only be considered when their children were much older and more able to think through the issues more fully. This was similar to the way many parents felt about returning to their children’s birth country where they felt such trips would be more beneficial to them when the children were older. This would be part of the ‘outer search’ (Irhammar and Cederblad 2000) where the initiative has to come from the adoptees themselves. As one mother explained the search had to be:

“..... when they are old enough to make that decision and the initiative has to come from them in the first instance I think because it can potentially be very traumatic. You have absolutely no idea how it is going to turn out. But we would regard it as quite wrong not to help them if that was what they wanted to do.” (14)

Waiting until the children are older to search for birth relatives would be in line with legislation related to domestic adoption where adoptees on reaching the age of eighteen have the right to information on their original birth certificate. This information will tell

them their original name and the name of their birth mother and sometimes their birth father. With this information it would be much easier to trace where their birth parents are now living. However, for families who have adopted children from overseas it is sometimes their lack of general information about the circumstances of the adoption that makes the adoptive parents want to try and find their children's birth relatives. This may be the reason for the search rather than wanting or expecting a continuing relationship to develop between them, their children and their birth parents/relatives.

One of the families who had adopted two boys from Sri Lanka (14) explained that they felt they had an advantage over other families when it came to talking about adoption and searching for birth relatives. The adoptive mother, who was herself adopted, had traced some members of her birth family and her adopted sons had experienced this first hand. She also felt that their sons had been of an age where they would be able to think through some of the issues themselves and understand what was taking place and the relevance of this to their own situation:

"We are in an unusually favourable position on that point. They must be capable of working that out for themselves because it's been quite a recent discovery. They came with us to meet all the most recent members of the family I have traced." (14)

One father who had adopted from Brazil and had made a return trip when his son was four years old, said that his son rarely asked about his birth family and as an adoptive parent he was unsure about the advisability of constantly reminding the child of his origins:

"I think he will ask one day but we have always taken the line that if he asks a question we will answer it but we are not going to feed him with information that he doesn't ask for because I think that can make a child confused and insecure. I think if you keep saying, 'I'm your father but there is another father somewhere else'. You should be aware of that. We have had some conversations about it but he hasn't shown enormous curiosity. I'm expecting that to happen when he becomes a teenager or even later. And we will tell him and if he wants to go back and find them we will help him do that." (26)

There appears to be a degree of variance coming across in this statement. At one level the father says he is prepared to answer his sons' questions but does not agree with the idea that there is a need for a child to know about his origins and:

"I think it must be desperately confusing for a child. I think all children want is the security of their home and a mum and a dad and if you start trying to expand on that it can create a lot of anxiety." (26)

7.2.2 Reasons given for not searching for birth relatives

Parents were concerned about the implication for the birth mothers if their children were to search and find where their mothers were now living. They expressed doubts similar to those held in the UK about the 'knock on the door' from an adopted adult searching for the mother than had relinquished them at birth. However, in practice this has not been an issue since adoptees have been given rights to information about their past which allows them access to their birth records (Triseliotis 1973, Feast and Howe 1997, Howe and Feast 2000).

There were parents who talked to their children about the possibility of finding their birth relatives but this was only to point out to them how difficult this would be. One mother, talking about her nine-year-old daughter who had been adopted from Sri Lanka, suggested that it might be better for everyone if they did not undertake such a search:

"She is going to go back one day and have a look around but the chances of her meeting her mum are pretty remote because we won't even know where to start. I have told her, her mum is probably married now and got more children. I have told her the circumstances and why she gave her up and she obviously loved her and that's why she gave her up. I think she has resigned herself to the fact she'll never find her mother because actually her mum did write out a declaration that she didn't want to be found." (02)

As this mother went on to explain the stigma surrounding illegitimacy in Sri Lanka is similar to concerns in the UK pre 1960s/1970s:

"In this country [Sri Lanka] you have babies and people are encouraged to keep them and then you have another relationship, you get married but in Sri Lanka they don't do that and young girls that aren't married just can't have babies when they are not married. However, Vicky's mother was married and she ran away from home. She didn't want her parents or anybody to know. I have told her, 'she [mother] is probably married, she is probably happy, she may have children and if you suddenly, years later turn up and say, 'I'm the baby you gave up', it would be a shock to her husband and everybody and they might all leave. The poor woman would be left all on her own and that's not fair on your mum. It's no good going back and ruining her life.'" (02)

It is unclear whether it is because the mother felt threatened by what a reunion would mean for her as an adoptive parent that she appears to be putting off her daughter from searching for her birth mother. Or she may be worrying about how the relationship between her and her daughter would change. Alternatively it may be because she feels a moral obligation to respect the values of the birth country and do not feel it is her place to challenge the stigma placed on women who have children out of wedlock or as a consequence of an extra marital relationship. However, she must be aware how the situation in the UK has changed over time and how today single parenthood is accepted far more with both social and financial support being available to enable women to keep their babies rather than give them up for adoption as happened so often in the past.

Additional questions could be asked about 'what happens if you do not like your birth mother and where they come from?' or 'you like your birth country but not your family?' or vice versa. An account in Argent (2002) by a family who had adopted from Paraguay and who had made a yearlong return visit back to Paraguay found there were several negative consequences as well as positive outcomes of their trip. The reactions of their two children differed in that their son wished he had not met his birth mother and he especially wished he did not know why she gave him up for adoption. Their daughter saw that there were families poorer than hers who loved and cherished their children and had not relinquished them for adoption. The adoptive mother felt that their commitment to telling their children the truth and finding out, via their return trip, as much as they were able to about their children's individual adoption situations had not benefited their

children as much as they had been hoping. They were therefore, left to wonder about whether they should have waited until their children were older and possibly more able to handle this type of information. This parent felt there was a need to reappraise the 'contact imperatives' because they felt there is too much emphasis on the positive outcomes and not enough consideration about the negative impact reunions can have on all parties (Argent 2002).

One of the mothers (10) who had adopted two children from Sri Lanka expressed similar concerns. She was worried that if her children decided to search for their birth mothers, there was the possibility of differences in expectations about the purpose of such reunions. She felt there was a chance that one party, birth mother or the child, may want to build up a lasting relationship but the other party may not want to or there may be situations where the birth mother rejects the child for a second time:

"I know a number of things can happen when you introduce children to their natural parents. On the one hand a reaction when you knock on the door, 'why have you come here?' Or you can get the situation where the natural mother regrets what she had done and wants to bring the children back. You get a tug of war on your hands. And it's not good for the children. And really when adoption takes place it has to be seen as a final thing. There is a lot of talk about the desirability of linking the children with their natural parents. But I think experience has shown that it's not a good thing really. Either the parents don't want to see them or the parents have a yearning to have them back." (10)

Howe and Feast (2000), in their research on domestic adoption, found that, whether reunions were short-lived and abrupt or comfortable and long-lasting, most searchers said the reunion had been a positive experience (p173), with more than eighty percent of adoptees saying that the contact had answered important questions about their background. Looking more specifically at adoptees whose ethnic origin differed from those of their parents Kirton et al (2000) report that transracial adoptees who were part of the above-mentioned study experienced similar levels of satisfaction. However, their motivation for searching differed to those of adoptees from same-race placements in that the issue of racial and ethnic identity was the main motivation for wanting to make contact with birth family members.

A mother who had adopted from Guatemala (07) and whose daughter was, at the time of interview, only a few months old had given some thought to the benefits or problems surrounding tracing of birth mothers but like many others was concerned about the secrecy which surrounds many adoptions:

"The one concern I would have is that the mother hadn't told the future husband and tracing her might throw a spanner in the works and that would be terrible. However, when she's eighteen or nineteen, or even when she is married she might want to go back. We have got their address, we have got everything. If she wants to do that, even if she only wants to go and observe, not let the mother know that she's there kind of thing. Not make contact with the mother. That's OK but I think in years to come it would be easy to just contact the lawyer if she wanted to and say, 'would you contact the mother and see if it was alright' or something."
(07)

The argument put forward about the possible impact on birth mothers who have not told anyone about the adoption is exactly the same argument put forward in the UK in the 1970s during the debate about whether adoptees should be given access to their original birth certificates. It will always be difficult, if not impossible to try to second-guess the reaction of birth mothers when a child who has been relinquished for adoption initiates contact. However, research on domestic adoptions seems to suggest that many birth parents had in fact been expecting their child to search and make contact with them soon after they reached the age of eighteen (Feast and Howe 1997). There have also been a number of accounts from birth mothers about their continuing feelings of loss after adoption and a longing to see their child again at some time (Hughes and Logan 1993, Morris 1999). Despite many birth mothers hoping, or possibly expecting their children to initiate a reunion with them in the Children's Society Post Adoption and Care Counselling Research Project 1988-1995, only twelve percent of their sample had initiated a search at the age of eighteen years (Feast and Howe 1997). In a fuller account of the findings from this study Howe and Feast (2000) and Kirton et al (2000) found that the outcomes of reunions were generally positive, but there were some that they described as 'fraught reunions'. This was usually the result of the birth parents continued preoccupation with their own needs and problems and consequently was

unable to give their children the information and emotional support they needed. However, it could be suggested that reunions may be a bigger issue in some of the sending countries where attitudes have not changed to the same extent in recent years as they have in the UK.

One family adopting from Sri Lanka (14) told about how they had experienced differences in attitude and behaviour between the birth mothers of their two sons at the time of the adoptions. One of the mothers was reluctant to hand over her son and was waiting outside the courtroom to have a last look at the baby, going as far as to slip a note with her address on it, into the adoptive father's hand. Whereas the other mother was described by the adoptive parents as appearing to be 'glad' to hand over her baby and seemed to want the whole process to be over as quickly as possible, leaving the court and walking away immediately proceedings finished. This may of course have nothing to do with being 'glad' about handing over her child but more about different coping strategies. The circumstances of the two mothers were very different with the 'reluctant' birth mother being a widow who already had three children but found herself abandoned by the father of her latest child when he heard she was pregnant; the other mother was younger, single, and unmarried:

"We have talked about this sort of thing but we have never thought of deliberately introducing either of our children to their birth parents. For two reasons, first of all there is very little evidence that they would actually like that to happen. Secondly, we have two very different situations. In the case of one birth mother the adoption papers say 'no contact'. This is always put on the papers but we have no evidence to the contrary. The other mother, despite having that put on the papers smuggled us an address written in English in the court. Which shows organisation, intelligence and courage." (14)

Another issue parents were concerned about was the expectations their children have about the circumstances in which the birth family are living and this was one of the reasons given for why the children need to be older before they consider tracing:

“Abi keeps saying, ‘will my mother be pretty? And all the rest of it. And I think she has a sort of romantic vision of her birth mother and when she finds her, or if she finds her, her birth mother’s going to be very poor. And the other children will be poor and Abi is not really mature to hide her disappointment and it would be terrible for the mother if Abi took one look at her and went, ‘ugh’. So really, I mean you do need to be a bit mature for it and understand that there is poverty out there.” (10)

Sometimes it becomes apparent to parents that their children are not ready for a search and this was the position one of the families adopting from Romania found themselves in. One day after a conversation with their daughter about her birth country the girl began to talk about her birth mother and got quite angry and said, ‘oh I would really like to meet that woman’. When her mother asked her why she replied:

“.....because I would like to tell her what I think about her. I think she was really mean and horrible and she didn’t act like a mother; fancy leaving me, a tiny little thing only two days old. I am really, really angry, she absolutely ruined my life.” (17)

The adoptive mother was quite concerned that her daughter was still so angry after nine years of living with them but appreciated that this outburst gave them the opportunity to discuss some quite serious issues that her daughter was having difficulty coming to terms with. After a long talk and an acknowledgement by the parents that their daughter had a right to be angry but not that her whole life had been ruined the daughter still wanted to see her birth mother but with a realisation that this would be in the future, and she said to her mother:

“I would really like to see her [birth mother] one day. Do you think I could go back and see her one-day? Not now but when I am ready to, when I am older.” (17)

Despite this possibly being an extreme example of a child’s reaction about why they would like contact with their birth mothers it will always be important for parents to talk through with the children about whether they are ready to undertake a search.

7.2.3 Doubts about true identity of the birth mother

A general issue of importance was introduced by one of the families adopting from Sri Lanka (10) and this was the doubt they felt about the true identity of the birth mother. The family had a photograph of their daughter's birth mother and had met the mother in the lawyer's office at the time of the adoption. However, this was not the woman who turned up at the court in Sri Lanka to relinquish the child. The parents did not question this at the time of the adoption. Similar doubts have been raised by one of the single women adopting from Guatemala (31) who suggested that in the adoption of one of her daughters the woman who had presented herself in court as being the mother of the baby was not in fact the real birth mother. In this case the adoptive mother did not seem unduly concerned because she felt that the expectation that a birth mother attends court to publicly hand over their baby is cruel. She felt that the emotional turmoil a woman would be feeling at this time would be unbelievable and to expect her to attend court was unrealistic. However, no such suggestion, about the unreasonableness of expecting the birth mother to attend court, was made by any of the families adopting from Sri Lanka where procedures are very similar. Nor has such an explanation been seen as valid by authorities in several countries. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights published a report about the sale of children in Guatemala (Economic and Social Council 2000). In this report it noted the practice of false mothers presenting babies for adoption which came to light when the Canadian embassy in Guatemala began carrying out DNA tests on babies and their 'mothers' in 1997 (p10). Many of the women presenting themselves in court as the mothers of the babies were not in fact the babies mothers and subsequently the USA and the UK both now require DNA testing of all babies adopted from Guatemala. Guatemala has been criticised for many irregularities in relation to the intercountry adoption procedures in their country (ISS Bulletins 29, 50-51 and 53, United Nations 2000, State Department website; The Guardian 27 August 1999; The Observer 21 January 2001) and when they acceded to the 1993 Hague Convention in November

2002 objections were raised by the UK⁹⁰ and the Netherlands⁹¹ about Guatemala's ability to comply with the requirements of the Convention within the given timeframe.

7.3 Searching for Information about Birth Relatives

One of the Guatemalan adopters (31) had maintained links with the foster carer of one of her daughters and she told about how the foster mother had assisted her in her search for the birth mother of her three children.⁹² At the time of the adoption the adoptive mother had obtained photographs of the birth mother for each of her three daughters. The adoptive mother explained how she had to 'push really hard' to get her lawyer to arrange to get this photograph because she felt that adoption in Guatemala was still 'closed' and secretive, as was the case in the UK not so many years ago. However, in addition to getting these photographs for her daughters, for a number of years she had been sending photographs of the children to the lawyer on a regular basis, trusting he was forwarding them on to the birth mothers but she had subsequently found that this was not happening. Therefore, when the foster mother had been visiting the adoptive family in the UK the adoptive mother had taken the opportunity of asking her to mediate between her and the birth mother by delivering some photographs of the children. Despite having addresses for the birth mothers it was felt that it would be inappropriate to send them through the post for two reasons: the birth mothers could have moved and the letters could have fallen into the wrong hands and cause distress and embarrassment to the mothers. There were three adopted children in this family and each of them knows the name of their birth mother and each was proud to tell the interviewer what these were. However, unlike other children in the current research was that the eldest of these children had often asked about her birth father. It was suggested this may have been because the children were being raised by a single mother so there was no father-figure in their lives and she may have been wishing to have a father, adoptive or otherwise:

⁹⁰ UK objection by Note dated 23 July 2003 in accordance with Article 44(3) of the Convention.

⁹¹ Netherlands objection by letter dated 18 July 2003 in accordance with Article 44(3) of the Convention.

⁹² This single mother had adopted three girls, was chairperson of the Guatemalan Families Association and had a keen interest in Guatemala.

“She says things like, ‘did my daddy have a coat, and did he have boots?’ (31)

When adoptive parents talked about birth parents they were in the main talking about the mother and the discussion about fathers was more limited. There were one or two adopters who knew that the birth father was either dead or that he was married to someone other than the birth mother but on the whole knowledge was limited⁹³. As can be the situation with domestic adoption in the UK details about the birth father was not always entered on the birth certificate or included in the social inquiry reports. The situation differed from country to country and as the mother adopting from El Salvador explained:

“In El Salvadorian adoptions if you know the father’s name I think he has to be responsible for the child. So they always put ‘father unknown’.” (11)

Another family who had adopted two children from Guatemala had also continued links via their children’s foster carers:

“We haven’t met the birth parents. We did only see the foster parents but in the last couple of months we have made contact with both of their families and both families have been thrilled to know about the children. It is something we have always wanted to do and because both families are illiterate and somewhat transient we felt that if we didn’t do it now and we waited until they were ready it could be too late. Things are not that good in Guatemala, and you just don’t know what’s going to happen. So the sooner the better. Then we will maintain contact over the next few years and then in the long term it will be up to the children what they want to do about it. But hopefully we will have kept that opportunity open for them.” (15)

The manner in which this family (15) were able to achieve the tracing of their children’s birth family was different to any of the other families in the current study in that they used the internet. The use of the internet for adoption was called into question after it

⁹³ For any of the anonymously abandoned children no information was available.

became public about the way in which the Kilshaw family⁹⁴ used it to find out about the availability of babies for adoption. This case not only highlighted the dangers of using the (unregulated) internet and it also brought calls for the banning of the internet for the promotion of adoption. However, it cannot be denied that there are large amounts of useful information posted on many of the web sites and it was through an American site that the family found out about a woman in Guatemala who was willing to help families trace birth relatives. The woman was a social worker who made contact and facilitated future communications. A big bonus from this contact has been the information that one of the other children in the Guatemala Family Association (GFA) is their son's cousin and lives quite close to them in the UK. For this family indirect contact (not meeting) with the birth family had given them the reassurance that the adoption had been legitimate and the child had been willingly relinquished for adoption:

"There are pretty horrific rumours about adoption from Guatemala and just to have it confirmed and to know that everything is fine. It is nice to have that extra assurance as well." (15)

7.4 Reunions with the Birth Family

Despite several of the families who had adopted from Sri Lanka emphasising the stigma of single parenthood being a factor deterring them from searching for their children's birth family one family (16) had not seen this as an issue and had traced several birth family members. They had made two return trips to Sri Lanka and on each occasion had met with the birth family. The first meeting was described as 'emotionally draining', and was made when their adopted daughter was only three years old. Tracing birth relatives when the child was so young was quite unusual and the instigators of the search were obviously the adoptive parents. The adopters were a young couple that had applied to adopt domestically and had been prepared to adopt an older child until it was suggested their religion (Jehovah's Witness) would reduce their chances of having a child placed

⁹⁴ The Kilshaw family gained notoriety after using the internet to find an American agency to adopt twin girls. Details of the case can be found on the BBC News website <http://news.bbc.co.uk> and Guardian Unlimited website www.guardian.co.uk

with them. Their willingness to adopt an older child who would have clear memories about their birth family would suggest this couple did not feel threatened about the idea of any children they were to adopt knowing, and possibly having contact with their family of origin.

The family explained how they had gone about tracing their daughter's birth mother. As with all adoptions in Sri Lanka the birth mother had been present in court at the time of the adoption and as the birth mother could speak a little English they were able to communicate with her. However, they still feel that a degree of determination is necessary to successfully trace the birth family. On their return to the UK after the adoption they had in their possession two addresses each of which purported to be the address of the birth mother. An added element of confusion was that they had been given two different accounts about the circumstances of the birth mother at the time of the adoption. They were told one account by their solicitor but this differed from the written account presented to the Sri Lankan court. The solicitor explained there was a difference because the court version was written in a way that would speed proceedings in the court. They felt this was unsatisfactory but there was little they could do about it at that time. They began their search by writing to both addresses and sending photographs of their daughter. Fortunately one of the addresses proved to be the correct one and lines of communications were opened, were maintained and subsequently led to the reunion.

In relation to the reunion the parents described when they first met the birth mother and how there was an immediate and positive reaction by their daughter. Despite normally being a quiet, shy child:

"She ran off straight to her birth mother. She had never seen her before as far as recognising her. She had five minutes, walked up to her, sat on her mum's knee for five minutes and then she had had enough, got down and went and played and that was it. It was weird because she never goes to strangers." (16)

The parents were proud of her reaction and explained how they had never felt threatened by the idea of their daughter having another family in Sri Lanka:

"I have never felt threatened by that fact that she has another mother. We are very open about it. No matter what, as she grows up, if she goes to the other side of the world I will have been her mummy who brought her up and I know she will always love me. I don't view it in a negative way at all. I just feel very, very positive. You have to accept that at some point they might want to go back and if you start being negative about it, that's going to cause problems in your relationship and you are going to put problems there instead of strengthening it." (16)

They also felt that the reunion has had a positive impact on them as parents and on their daughter. They feel that being open with her and more especially having made two return visits and meeting the birth family has made it comfortable and easier for their daughter to talk to them about both Sri Lanka and her birth mother:

"She is interested. She talks about it and she has down times when she misses her birth mother. She misses her and wants to see her again. But it is not something she dwells on. Now whether that's a way of coping I don't know. She sometimes says things like, 'would I be doing that in Sri Lanka? What time of day is it in Sri Lanka?'" (16)

The family would love to return annually but do not have the money required for such trips. They talk very positively about the Sri Lankan people and their generosity. When they were first over in Sri Lanka, when their daughter was a baby they did find that some Sri Lankans asked whether they had bought the child. What surprised them was that it did not seem to matter how they answered:

"They didn't seem to have a problem with that even if you did say 'yes'. They just said, 'very lucky baby', 'lucky child'." (16)

When this family (16) were last in Sri Lanka they undertook a search for the birth parents of two children adopted by friends of theirs. They have been successful in tracing one set of birth parents but not the other. This is becoming problematic because the child whose birth family had not been traced is getting distressed by it and wants to go to Sri Lanka to try and find her parents. This is a difficult situation for families when they have adopted more than one child and they begin a search for birth family members when there is the

possibility they may be successful in tracing the family of one child but not the other. How does this make either of the children feel? This case of searching on behalf of another family is not an isolated case and when the researcher was present at a seminar organised by AFAA one of the speakers was an adoptive mother who told about her experiences of undertaking a search on behalf of another adoptive family.

7.5 Summary and Discussion

Reunions with birth families can be seen as a third stage in the adoption story for intercountry adoptees. As described in chapter five one of the first tasks or stages of the adoption story is for adoptive parents to aid their children in the construction of an adoption narrative via the telling of their personal biography and heritage. For children who have been adopted from overseas an additional task for parents is telling them about their birth country and trying to give them a sense of pride in their country – the second stage of the adoption story or journey. Some, but not all, parents felt this was made easier if they made a trip to their children's birth country. A third stage of constructing an adoption story is the search for more information about the birth family and the possibility of making contact or having a reunion with the birth mother and/or other birth family members. Whilst the children are young this journey will be monitored and guided by the parents as the children get older they will be the ones who decide how the journey will proceed. However, for the purpose of this thesis it is the parents' perspective that is being looked at because, in all but one case the children are still young.⁹⁵

The one family who had undertaken a search and had had a reunion with their daughter's birth family had found this a positive experience. Despite reunions often being a positive experience Christensen (1999) warns that they do not complete the story and do

⁹⁵ See Appendix D: Characteristics of the Adopted Children for ages of the children at the time of the adoption

not fill the 'hole' that many adoptees talk about because she suggests 'blood is not enough'. However, none of the Danish adoptees in the Christensen (1999) research regretted the reunion with their birth family (usually the birth mother) and all spoke of how important the reunion had been to them and talked about how the reunion had made them feel 'real'. The meeting with the birth mother presented the adoptees with a 'beginning' that they felt then allowed them to talk about themselves with a sense of greater authenticity. Christensen found that despite the reunion being a positive experience, no long term or permanent relationships had developed and the adoptees still 'struggled' with questions about who they were related to. However, with reference to the families in this study it is still early days to be able to know whether any of the contacts (reunions or written communications) will be maintained. For the family adopting from Sri Lanka who had met the birth family (16), it does seem there may be problems in maintaining a long-term relationship because the family does not have the financial resources to make regular visits to Sri Lanka. However, it may be possible to maintain contact by means other than visiting Sri Lanka which would benefit their daughter if she wanted to return to Sri Lanka in a number of years when she reaches adulthood.

A question raised about this case is the age of the child at the time of the first reunion. She was only three when they first initiated a search and met with the birth family and it could be asked why did they do this when their daughter was still so young? Was their daughter old enough to understand the significance of this reunion or to benefit from the contact? Or was it to ensure they were in control of the situation? It does not seem that the parents included the child in the decision-making process - it was something the parents had decided would be beneficial. In her research about contact arrangements in domestic adoptions Neil (2002b) notes two things, firstly that face-to-face contact is rarely set up for very young children and secondly, that it is vital that all parties understand the purpose of the contact. It could be suggested that it is the same in reunion situations that all parties need to have similar expectations if they have a chance of being successful. However, this is not always the case and it can be seen as one of the major difficulties when managing reunions successfully. It is difficult to imagine that all

parties will have similar expectations in the case of intercountry adoptions and therefore as predicted by Neil (2002b) there is the likelihood that either party will be disappointed by the way the contact or the reunion develops.

One of the added benefits of making contact with the birth mother or other birth family members is that the adoptive parents can be reassured that the adoption is legitimate and the adoption had been the wish of the birth mother. This was seen as particularly important for one of the Guatemalan adopters who was in contact with, but had not met, the birth mother.

Despite there only being one family who had experience of a reunion with the birth family others expressed opinions about many issues regarding their attitudes about trying to find their children's birth family. One main concern was that the children should be old enough to understand the possible consequences of reunions. There were others who added that the initiative had to come from the children and it was not up to them, the adoptive parents, to decide if or when a search should be made. It is difficult to decide whether parents will in fact undertake a search and reunion with their children's birth parents or whether they were in fact closing down the option via considered reasoning about the negative aspects and consequences of reunions. This was especially the case for families who had already returned to their child's birth country and had made no contact with the agency, lawyer or other personal connected to the adoption. Similarly with families who were adamant that the situation in Sri Lanka in relation to the stigma associated with single parenthood was enough to ensure that they would discourage their children from considering a search and reunion. However, adoptees will always have curiosity about their origins and Cox (1999a) warns that adoptive families should not view intercountry adoption as a way of avoiding birth families ever appearing in their lives because many intercountry adoptees have searched and been successful in finding their birth families. This will not be an issue for families who have adopted abandoned children from China and it has been suggested (Gailey 1999, 2000) this is one of the main

attractions of adopting children from China and other countries where the children have been anonymously abandoned.

The topic of searching for information about birth relatives (usually the birth mother) and thinking about making contact with them clearly highlights a major difference between domestic adoptions and intercountry adoption because in domestic adoption increased levels of openness are the norm and continued contact, or at the very least information exchange, is encouraged⁹⁶. However, where intercountry adoption and domestic adoption may differ the most is where adoptive parents are the ones searching for birth relatives when their children are still young. Practice and legislation in the England and Wales gives adoptees, after the age of eighteen years⁹⁷, access to information to their original birth certificate that would give them sufficient information from which they could initiate their own search.

Most cases of intercountry adoption are more similar to adoptions of the past where very little information was passed on to the adoptive parents and therefore there was very little information for them to pass on to the children. Adult intercountry adoptees have access to less information than do domestically adopted adults who have over the years gradually been given more rights and more post adoption support. However, within the *Adoption and Children Act 2002* there is provision for the registration of certain foreign adoptions on the *Adopted Children Register* which will in principle gives intercountry adoptees similar rights to domestic adoptees.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Increased openness is linked to the older age of children now being adopted.

⁹⁷ In Scotland the age is seventeen years.

⁹⁸ Implemented via the Registration of Foreign Adoptions Regulations 2003, which came in to force on 1st June 2003.

Introduction to Part Four

Origins: Living the Experience

In Part Three the underlying theme was that of identity formation and in particular personal identity and the need to know and have an understanding about ones personal biography and heritage. The following chapters (8 and 9) in Part Four will be about the social elements of identity formation. Social or external identity is the part of oneself which belongs to a community, a family and other social groups which brings with it feelings of attachment, sympathy, affiliation, devotion and respect for others (Jarymowicz in Worchel 1998). It is because social identity is based on roles and status, arranged according to how they are defined by society and from collective identities which includes national or ethnic groups that the reactions and perceptions of others are so important. Identifying with different groups becomes internalised and a part of the individual's self-concept i.e. identity is part of being connected to others. Therefore, social identity refers to the ways in which we distinguish social relations with other individuals and groups in society; it is our understanding of who we are and of who other people are, and, reciprocally, what other people understand of us (Jenkins 1996 p5).

There is widespread belief that the family is a natural unit that is determined by the biological process of having children but Richards and Light (1986) suggests that 'the family' should be seen as a social unit. The family is not only a biological unit but is a unit based on social ties and additionally children do not just belong to the family; they continuously create the family (Mayall 1994). Therefore a family who adopt a child from overseas who is of different race or ethnic origin to other members of the family will become a mixed-race family and the family will be an interracial family for generations to come. As Chestang (1972) suggests, 'the white family that adopts a black child is no longer a 'white family'' (p102) and not only will the social identity of the children be influenced but the social identity of other family members will also change by the presence of the children from overseas.

A part of a person's social identity that will be important for intercountry adoptees is ethnic identity formation. This is usually seen as a minority identity within a society that is dominated by a majority group. However, the formation of a positive racial/ethnic identity is complex and is influenced by multiple inputs from both the family and society. In the majority of cases intercountry adoptees and their parents will differ in their ethnic origins and physical appearance and this will be obvious to themselves and others. Physical and bodily differences are unalterable and are a permanent reminder to both parents and adoptees of their lack of genetic connectedness i.e. appearance is the 'ethnic marker' that sets adoptees apart from their families (Saetersdal and Dalen 1991, 2000). Therefore, identity formation for adoptees will be influenced by the way they see themselves but also as others see them. How intercountry adoptees are to form a positive ethnic identity based around their birth country will be difficult and children will need the support and encouragement from their parents from an early age.

Firstly there is a need to consider what is meant by the term racial/ethnic identity. A number of definitions are available but most refer to an individual's identification with a culturally defined group and their sense of belonging to a particular cultural community or group (Aspinall 2002, Hutchinson and Smith 1996). However, there is considerable debate about the foundations of ethnic identity formation. There are those who see ethnic identity as being ascribed by ties individuals have with each other via blood relationships, race, religious beliefs, language, customs and regional/community links. The tendency with such models is to see ethnic identity as static and naturalistic where in reality it is an identity that overlaps with other identities with individuals having the capacity to assume various identities that change over time and place. In this more flexible view ethnic identity is seen as being socially constructed with individuals having a degree of control over the identities they wish to assume (Cohen 1994, Hall and Jefferson 1993). Within such models of identity formation it is suggested that ethnicity is but one aspect of identity and can be given different levels of priority and significance by the individual.

Therefore, ethnic identity has as much to do with whether people feel they belong to a certain group and the individual's realisation that part of themselves is consistent with those of other members of a certain ethnic group. Such models of identity formation suggest that the essential parts are the 'being', the 'doing' and the 'knowing' about oneself. For children who have been adopted from overseas by families living in the UK the 'being' element of their identity has to do with their biographical origins and how they learn about this part of themselves. This has been dealt with in the previous chapters about the telling of the adoption story, returning to the birth country and searching and reunions where there was an examination about how children learned about their personal biographical heritage/origins. The following two chapters will be concerned with the 'doing' and the 'knowing' element of identity in the form of their lived experiences. The research will look at ways in which parents support their child(ren)'s acquisition of cultural knowledge about their ethnic origins and the different levels of encouragement children are given by their parents to achieve a sense of belonging to an ethnic minority group. However, during these discussions there will be no attempt to evaluate the impact on children of their parents' attempts to include aspects of ethnic diversity into their lives and there is an acknowledgement that a racial/ethnic identity is but one component of self and personal identity (McRoy and Hall 1996) and that a positive sense of one's self worth (self esteem) may be more important than the need for a specific racial/ethnic identity. Firstly however, the research shall look at some of the issues which have been raised about the importance of race and ethnic identity for children adopted by families from different cultural backgrounds and more particularly for children adopted from overseas to have an identity based on the culture of their birth country.

Race and Ethnicity - The Debate

The role of race, culture and ethnicity has for a number of years been the principal focus surrounding debates on policy related to adoption which have been transracial but this has often been in relation to domestic adoption where children have been placed with families from a different ethnic/racial background to that of the child - usually a 'black'

child with white parents (Gaber 1994). Much of the debate and subsequent issues raised in relation to transracial/transcultural adoptions are also applicable to ICA because by their very nature they are either transracial or transcultural and, therefore, an outline of some of the major arguments about this debate are summarised below. However, it is first worth raising the question about why in the USA, where there is some of the most vociferous opposition to transracial adoption, there is little opposition to intercountry adoption founded on issues of race? It might be the case that it is as much to do with the management and organisation of the two different types of adoptions. The majority of domestic adoptions, whether, in-racial or transracial are administered by government and statutory agencies/organisations and the decisions about child placements are made by social workers, whereas intercountry adoptions are handled by private agencies who specialise in this type of adoption and decisions about whether the child can be adopted overseas is made by the agents or agencies in the birth country. That is to say it is the country of origin who agrees that taking everything into account, it is in the child's best interests, that they are adopted overseas.

In the debate about the issue of race it is generally accepted that children who have been adopted by families with different racial/ethnic origins are likely to have additional identity formation tasks because their ethnic group membership will not be clearly established and recognised (Kirton 2000a, 2000b, Gaber and Aldridge 1994). Discussions about the importance of transracial/transcultural adoptees having a positive black identity emerged in British anti-racist social work during the 1980s and runs through the writings of Small (1986, 1991), the Association of Black Social Workers and Allied Professions (ABSWAP) (1983) and Maxime (1986). However, it has been suggested that the concept of a 'positive black identity' is problematic (Tizard and Phoenix 1994) because of the underlying assumption that people see themselves as either black or white. Banton (1987) agrees with this suggestion, as does Modood (1988) who found that many Asians in the population in Britain did not see themselves as 'black' although the majority of young Afro-Caribbean people do.

One of the first objectors to adoptions that were transracial was the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) in the USA who have been strongly opposed to such adoptions since 1972 when they stated that children belong physically, emotionally and culturally to their racial origins and not to the white majority population (NABSW 1972). Kirton (2000a) labels the oppositional perspective as the 'black radical paradigm' where there is greater emphasis on the child's ethnic origins, with culture and heritage seen as the child's birthright and important for the child's future survival against racism. In this view the best interests of the child are served via autonomy and separation away from white families and to be raised with families from a similar ethnic or racial background. Also seen, as a major advantage of same race placements is that black families are more able to provide children with an awareness of racism, have the ability to deal with experiences of racism and offer positive role models (Small 1986, Barn 1999, Thoburn et al 2000). This oppositional perspective questions transracial and transcultural adoptions on a number of issues including the extent to which children can become part of a different culture, and severing children from their culture is equivalent to other forms of violent separation of children from their families and environments. Findings from research suggest that children who are adopted across racial or ethnic lines are less likely to develop a strong racial or cultural identity than children raised within their own racial and cultural communities (Gill and Jackson 1983, Bagley 1991, McRoy 1991); Simon and Altstein (1987) found a small numbers of adoptees had identity confusion; Westhues and Cohen (1994, 1998) in their research in Canada found that ten percent of adoptees considered themselves to be white and finally Bagley (1991) found a similar proportion of his sample experienced confusion about their racial identity. However, what none of this research does is to give details about how much and in what ways the parents try to encourage their children to have a racial identity linked to their birth country.

Detailed summaries of research findings about the outcome of adoptions that have been transracial can be found in Park and Green (2000) and Simon and Altstein (2000). Those in favour of transracial/transcultural adoptions base much of their argument on these research findings which generally indicate good outcomes for the children on a number of different indicators, and parents have been found to have high levels of satisfaction

with the adoption placement. From these results it has been suggested that adoptions across racial boundaries are a viable means of providing stable homes for children. Proponents of transracial or transcultural adoptions also suggest that race should not be a part of the decision making process about the placement of children with new families (Bartholet 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Morgan 1998).⁹⁹ For them it is more important for the child to have the permanence a family of their own can provide, than the insecurity of state care, either in the UK in the case of domestic adoption, or overseas in the case of intercountry adoption. Writing in favour of transracial and transcultural adoption, Hayes (1993, 1995) contends that adoptive parents' promotion of their children's racial and cultural identification is unnecessary for positive psychological adjustment. Bartholet (1994) appears to agree with this assessment, suggesting that there is no evidence from research indicating that the absence of a satisfactory ethnic and cultural identity presents psychological harm to adoptees, and she also goes further than other writers by suggesting there are a number of advantages for children to be raised in white families in white dominated societies.

The views expressed in this perspective have been labelled 'colorblind individualism' (Freundlich 2000), where the 'best interest of the child' is stated as the main objective and race issues are discounted. Kirton (2000a) has labelled this ideology as the liberal paradigm and he extends these ideas to intercountry adoptions where it is believed that life in the West (the child's new home) is best and parents should have the right to adopt children from poorer non-western countries.

McRoy et al (1984) used a similar typology to describe attitudes and coping mechanisms of parents whose domestic adoption had been transracial. In their study they identified three different philosophies about what was the best way to address race and ethnic identity. The first was the above-mentioned 'colour-blindness', where parents felt that

⁹⁹ This is reflected in legislation in the UK via the Children and Adoption Act 2002 and in the USA via the Multi-ethnic Placement Act 1994.

everyone was the same and colour was not an issue. The parents did not identify themselves as a mixed-race family because they preferred not to see as important the difference in colour between them and their children. The outcome for children raised in families with this view was that they de-emphasised their black heritage and were reluctant to identify with any particular racial group, believing that 'human' identity was more important than racial identity. The second group of parents did acknowledge race and the need to provide black role models, which resulted in children seeing themselves as mixed, or part white but saw no need to dismiss or de-emphasize their black heritage. Finally, there were families who saw the family unit not as white but as interracial and children raised by these parents were found to be the most likely to have a strong black identity. Therefore, how the parents see themselves as a family unit in terms of racial identity will greatly influence the children's future perceptions of their ethnic identity.

There is similar debate about the importance and need for foreign-born adoptees to have an ethnic minority identity. Brottveit (1999) found a wide variation in attitudes amongst adoptees adopted from Korea by Norwegian families towards their origins, their appearance and the importance they gave to either. He supports the rights of adoptees to have different approaches to identity formation, which includes expectations about what they want and expect from parents about the level of support they receive from them in their quest for an ethnic identity. This contrasts with Hubinette (2002) who suggests many adopted Koreans are in the process of trying to create an ethnic identity of their own in what he describes as the 'third space'. This 'third space' is the space between their birth country's dream of a global ethnic Korean community (Kim 2000) and their adoptive country which, he suggests:

'demands complete assimilation and absolute loyalty and refuses to give space to anything else but rescue fantasies, colonial desires and orientalist performances'. (Hubinette 2002 p4)

Hubinette is sceptical about Korean adoptees being able to be a part of this global community, or 'extended family', as visualised by the Korean government, because the

only shared identity the majority of adoptees have is a history of being adopted from Korean and this differentiates them from other Koreans either living overseas or living in North or South Korea. The diversity needed to form a global ethnic Korean community would have to be multinational because most Korean adoptees have changed their citizenship to that of their adoptive country; it would also have to be multiracial because many adoptees have married non-Koreans and finally multilingual because most Korean adoptees are unable to speak Korean.

It is, therefore, apparent that one of the major concerns about adoptions that are transracial and/or transcultural, and particularly for this thesis about experiences of adoption from overseas, is that the children will not have any sense of their birth culture, which will then lead to them failing to acquire a positive racial/ethnic identity. Trolley et al (1995) writing about intercountry adoptions, suggest that 'acknowledgement' of a child's birth culture is not enough and what is needed is involvement in a wide range of cultural activities which has to be started by the parents when the children are young. It is not enough to leave the way open for children to learn about their cultural heritage when they reach adolescence or adulthood i.e. there is a need to 'promote' the child's birth culture (Crumbley 2003). Research suggests that families who appear to acknowledge that their family, not just their children, is different are more likely to achieve an increased sense of satisfaction about the adoption (McRoy and Zurcher 1983, Dalen 1999, Dalen and Saetersdal 2000).

A number of ways have been suggested which the children can be introduced to 'ethnic' experiences and these include having cultural artefacts and books in the home, preparing special foods, establishing ties with families who have children of the same culture, become involved with social events and groups from similar origins (Carstens and Julia 2000), some of whom will act as positive role models, create family rituals which acknowledge and honour the child's birth culture, and learning the language of their child's birth culture. In addition to these options research findings suggest that living in

diverse cultural neighbourhoods and attending multicultural schools have a major role to play in helping children to understand about ethnic diversity (Kallgren and Caudill 1993).

The formation of an ethnic identity occurs within a social context and is influenced both directly and indirectly by people within the social milieu in which people live; therefore, it is not only the adoptive parents' attitudes, but also society's attitudes that will have an impact on the child's perception about their ethnic origins (Irhammar and Cederblad 2000). A major feature of society's reaction and behaviours towards minority populations is that of racism which will influence children's developing feelings of self worth and their social identity - racism will be considered in more detail in chapter nine. External ethnic identification will be important in a number of ways for the child's ethnic identity development (Dalen and Saetersdal 2000, Tizard and Phoenix 1989, 1994, 1995) and as every society is different, the experience of living in one country will be different from experiences of living in another. This will be especially true for intercountry adoptees that as a consequence of their adoption and being removed from their birth country, they may then become a member of an ethnic minority group that will influence their identity formation. An additional impact of external (societal) influences on a person's identity development is that research findings from one country will not be transferable to another (Triseliotis et al 1997).

It was clear during the interviews that in the majority of cases the children had no contact with their birth families and had limited relationships with contemporaries in their birth country with which they shared their ethnicity. It was also apparent that it was often difficult for parents to maintain continued links with their children's birth country but it has been suggested that there are number of different ways in which parents can give children opportunities to gain a sense of their ethnic origins. However, it will always be difficult for parents to decide how to transmit to their children practices, habits and values that are not part of daily life. What aspect of the culture do we inform our children about and on what basis do we pick and choose? A major issue to be addressed by all members of ethnic minority groups, which in this case will include many

intercountry adoptees, is that of racism and discrimination. If these are widespread, it is possible that attributes of racial and social identity may assume greater importance in the hierarchy of factors contributing to a social and personal identity. Some of these issues will be looked at in more detail in the following two chapters.

Chapter 8: (Re)Introducing Children to their Birth Culture

8.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine whether parents have introduced ethnic diversity into their lives and the lives of their children and whether parents encourage their children to have an understanding and knowledge about the culture of their birth country. It will begin by trying to indicate the level of knowledge parents have about their child's birth country and attempts to evaluate how important they feel it is for their children to have an awareness about their cultural heritage. The research shall also examine ways in which parents talk about differences in appearance between themselves and their children. Out of a total sample of forty-three children, thirty-six were different in appearance to their adoptive parents; the remaining children consisted of five who were adopted from Eastern Europe who were dark haired but not dark skinned, and two fair skinned children from the USA. Finally, there will be a closer look at aspects of diversity in the lives of the family in relation to where they live, and whether language or religion is seen as important for helping the children to gain a better understanding of the culture of their birth country.

8.2 'Getting it Right' - The Challenge

Before taking a look at the different ways in which the children were given opportunities and encouragement to experience their cultural heritage it is worth mentioning that many parents pointed out, that for them the biggest problem was that of 'getting it right'. As in Chapter Five where parents were concerned about 'getting it right' when they began telling children about their adoption the majority of parents were also concerned that there was something they had to 'get right' when talking to their children about their cultural heritage. There was an awareness of the importance for their children to know about their origins but they were unsure about how much emphasis this should be given.

Parents worried both about whether they were paying too little attention to their child's birth culture or whether they were being too 'encouraging' and putting pressure on their children to learn about something in which they had little or no interest. One such mother who was actively involved in promoting Chinese culture to her daughter was unsure about whether this was truly the best thing to be doing:

"You emphasise your child's different ethnicity at the risk of separating them from you." (24)

Therefore, it is necessary to ask how much information and emphasis should parents place on their child's origins? In his guidelines to parents who adopt children with a different racial or ethnic heritage to their own, Crumbley (1999) suggests it is important to provide the child with role models and positive contact within the ethnic community from which the child belongs. He suggests that not only does this allow the child to learn aspects of their birth culture firsthand but also it gives the child respite from always being in the minority. It additionally provides positive support to counteract any negative racial experiences or negative stereotyping which the children may encounter in the future.¹⁰⁰

As the appearance of the majority of the children differs from that of their parents it was clear that differences could not be denied and adoption was openly discussed and talked about by all parents. What was not as evident was the extent to which parents valued and incorporated into their lives the children's racial, cultural and national heritage. Most parents stated that exposing their children to their birth culture was beneficial, but there were variations about the perceived importance of this. Some parents were trying to encourage high levels of knowledge about the children's birth culture but other parents preferred to encourage what has been referred to as a 'minimal bi-cultural competence' (Anderson 1999), which they hoped, would allow their children to feel comfortable about their heritage. Talking about themselves and their friends who had also adopted from China, one mother explained the confusion they felt:

¹⁰⁰ Aspects of racism and experiences of the families are outlined in more detail in Chapter 9.

"I don't know whether our daughters are Chinese or British or a bit of the two. I think they themselves will probably change their minds according to how old they are." (02)

8.2.1 Families where the children's cultural heritage was not a priority

There were a number of families where promoting a cultural awareness was not a priority and who believed that the best way to ensure the well being of their children was to raise them exactly as if they had been born into the family. They practised the above-mentioned 'colour-blindness', which they regarded as a virtue. Similar findings have been reported by Trolley et al (1995) who found that there were overseas adoptive families in the USA who tried to 'Americanise' their children and in extreme cases actively resisted preserving the child's culture of origin. These authors do however acknowledge that this may be partly because the adopters had a lack of understanding about the child's birth culture. At the same time, however, they do not accept this as a valid reason for not educating the child about their country and its culture because they suggest that as the children grow up they will not be colour-blind, nor will the people around them.

One of the families adopting from Sri Lanka (21)¹⁰¹ was a good example of a family who, whilst acknowledging their children's birth culture, did not actively promote Sri Lankan culture or incorporate aspects of Sri Lanka into their daily life. In fact the parents were sceptical about the validity of stressing the birth culture of adoptees and asked:

"Just how robust is the advice? I mean they are our kids they are English. Graeme follows England as his team and Arsenal as his club team." (21)

It was not that they dismissed the importance of culture and nationality but felt there were problems of 'getting it right', in a similar vein to many other parents. They were unsure

¹⁰¹ These were the parents of the oldest children in the sample, aged fourteen and eighteen years, who were adopted in the 1980s.

to which culture they needed to give greater emphasis. They explained that although the family were living in England and the children had been born in Sri Lanka these were only two factors influencing the family's cultural heritage. The parents themselves were Irish and were proud of their Irish heritage and encouraged their children to value this by making several visits a year to Ireland. The family had also lived overseas, the parents for several years and the children for one or two years. The parents felt that each of these factors had a part to play in how they saw themselves and the importance they placed on each cultural influence. Overall they felt that it was preferable to live the culture of the place in which they were currently living¹⁰².

A similar argument was put forward by one of the families adopting from China (03), who believed that an awareness of Chinese culture was unnecessary and that the decision about ethnicity should be left to the children themselves:

"To try and pretend that we can keep any Chinese culture going, we cannot do it – you can't - she's a Geordie. She is a Geordie and her culture will be the culture she is living in and at a later stage if she wants to sort of find out more we will support her in that. The reality of the Chinese child in this country is that they do adopt the westernised ways." (03)

Concern about how much children should be encouraged to absorb into and become a part of the community in which they live rather than their culture of origin have also been found to be a issue for immigrant families whose children have been born in the UK. In a small study of Chinese families living in Newcastle upon Tyne, Lie (2002) found 'some children were at risk of losing their identity as Chinese through assimilation' and the children not being fluent in Chinese exacerbated this. In many cases the parents were concerned about their children's lack of interest in learning to speak fluent Chinese and other aspects of Chinese culture.

¹⁰² Examples of how the two children in this family managed their experiences of racism are discussed in the following chapter.

For children whose appearance does not differ from that of their adoptive parents and other family members the issues are different. Parents may find that it is easier for them because it will be less obvious that the children have been adopted and they will not find themselves in situations where they have to explain about the child's origins. However, it may also be easier to ignore the fact that the children are from a different culture, or at least to underplay the significance of cultural differences between themselves and their children. This can then mean that parents do not give the children the opportunity to learn about their cultural heritage ¹⁰³. An associated issue concerns the importance parents place on the culture of the child's birth country when the children had lived in an institution prior to being adopted. During their research with Romanian adoptive families Beckett et al (1999) found that some of the adopters found it difficult to appreciate any sense of acceptable cultural heritage on behalf of their children because they felt that their children had no culture living in institutions in Romania. Beckett et al found some parents had been very open in their discussions and willingness to talk to the children about adoption but they had not felt that the children's Romanian identity was important and had not taken any particular interest in Romanian culture themselves. Of the four families included in this thesis who had adopted from Romania, there was only one family (30) that voiced similar opinions about a lack of cultural heritage for adoptees from Romania, with each of the other families practising varying degrees of cultural involvement.

During discussions with parents about their active involvement in ethnic and cultural activities it is worth noting many made the point that over time the emphasis/significance changed for a number of different issues. At any given time, when raising children, there will be issues that dominate and take precedence over others, and this was found to be the same about how much emphasis was given by adopters to ethnicity, adoption and the child's birth country. This was explained by the family adopting from Chile (19) who

¹⁰³ In a recent study in New Zealand Scherman and Harre (2004) found that families adopting children from Eastern European countries 'do acknowledge their children's birth culture' and to 'some extent engage in cultural activities' (p69).

suggested that for them after a number of years the focus on the child's birth country had become less important and a less essential part of their everyday lives:

"It becomes less and less relevant. When our daughter first came to live with us we were very interested and we put a lot of energy into making links with other Chileans and keeping up the Spanish. We thought that was very important but you then realize the difficulty of that and you have to look for other ways to become more part of the community you are in. So we will have Spanish as just another of those skills that you learn in the same way you want your child to learn swimming. They are important life skills and Spanish will be just that but we won't necessarily be able to fit in with the Hispanic community. I think you shouldn't lose sight of the country of origin but it is much easier for us living here [London]." (19)

It could be suggested that a sense of being 'comfortable' with their children's ethnicity is important because it enables parents to both acknowledge and enjoy the diversity which adopting a child from another country has brought to the family. There is a sense that in the early days after the adoption there was a need to consciously and possibly artificially include the children's birth country into their daily lives. However, as time goes by families find ways in which to incorporate elements of their child's birth culture into their lives which felt right for them as a family.

8.2.2 Knowledge about the children's birth culture

If parents are concerned about 'getting it right' they will have to have a knowledge base upon which to make decisions. If they are to provide their children with a cultural heritage they have to know about, be interested in and feel the need to teach their children about their birth culture. For some parents this can be a daunting task because many will be ill prepared and it was asking them firstly to give the children something they did not possess themselves (similar cultural heritage) and secondly, something they knew little about. There was a good deal of variation amongst the parents in the level of ethnic/cultural awareness, either about their child's birth country/culture or about cultures outside the UK, which they had prior to adopting a child from overseas. There were eight families where at least one of the parents had worked overseas for extended periods and therefore, had first hand experience of other cultures and of themselves being in the

minority during their time overseas (6,7,12,14,17,19,21,27). This relatively small number of families who had lived overseas for extended periods is less than that reported by the International Bar Association (Mostyn and Bennett 1991) where as many as fifty percent of adopting mothers and thirty seven percent of fathers had lived overseas at some point before becoming adoptive parents. Despite families not being asked about their origins there were four families (10, 11, 15, 21)¹⁰⁴ who during the interview told about how they felt they belonged to minority populations in the UK. Three of these families (11, 15, 21) had spent some, if not all of their childhood in a country other than England. These parents said that on occasions they felt different to the majority population in England, despite not looking different - the only non-white parent was an Indonesian Chinese father who, unlike the other three families, had lived in England since he was young child (10). All other families in the sample were white and did not mention whether they were anything other than English. It could have been assumed that these parents who felt they were part of a minority population living in England would have given greater emphasis to their children's birth culture than parents who had only experienced living as a member of the majority population, and the father who was Chinese might have been especially empathetic towards their children's appearance. However, as will be seen in the accounts below, this was not necessarily the case. It will also be of interest to note which if any of the parents with experience of living overseas gave prominence to the culture of their child's birth country.

Of the families adopting from China the single mother living in London (24) was the most actively interested in learning about Chinese culture and had many books about China around the home. The adoptive mother was learning the Chinese language as well as living in an ethnically mixed area in London. The other seven families adopting from China all lived in the North East of England and all but one of them appeared far less inclined to see cultural heritage and a Chinese ethnic identity as important. The one family (05) which was concerned about incorporating Chinese cultural experiences into

¹⁰⁴ 10-father Chinese; 11-mother half Italian; 15-mother New Zealander, father Welsh; 21-both parents Irish.

their everyday life socialised on a regular basis with members of the Chinese community from which long term friendships had developed. Therefore, there are two families adopting from China who are trying to learn about Chinese culture, each in a different way (05, 24) and one other family (09) who, as described in chapter 6, had made a return trip to China as a way to learn more about the Chinese culture.

One family (22) had adopted two girls from Sri Lanka and were active participants in two different ICA family support groups (AFAA, Sri Lanka Family Group). They themselves had, over the years become more and more aware that some families were less keen than others to keep alive the memories of Sri Lanka. However, they felt it was important to make a conscious effort to incorporate aspects of Sri Lankan culture into their everyday life. They had several Sri Lankan artefacts around the house, which they had bought during their return trip to Sri Lanka with the children since the adoption and from their visit at the time of the adoption. The mother and her daughters had an ongoing project of making a model of a typical Sri Lankan house. They also tried to include some aspects of Sri Lankan food into their diet but commented that this may not be truly authentic food because they did not make it as spicy as it would be in Sri Lanka and some of the ingredients were not readily available in the UK. Additional links with Sri Lankan life included support, which had been offered to them by one of the organisers of a Sri Lankan Social and Cultural Organisation. The main objective of this organisation was to educate children of ex-patriots i.e. the British born Sri Lankan children but, the President had befriended this family and had also 'gone out of her' way to help other families who had adopted from Sri Lanka. This had included organising language classes, teaching the children traditional Sri Lankan dances and there was an open invitation for all the adoptive families to attend their New Year Celebrations. At a recent party their daughters had taken part in a dancing display. However, the girl's response about whether they enjoy going to these sorts of occasions was to say that they 'are boring', although, according to their parents, they go of their own accord and during the interview seemed quite willing to talk about their weekly Sri Lankan dancing classes. It was very apparent during the interview that both parents were fascinated with Sri Lanka culture and were keen that both of their adopted daughters should be equally enthusiastic to learn

about their birth country. However, as this example illustrates it can be difficult for parents to decide how much they should 'encourage' their children to become involved in birth culture activities or whether it would be better to wait until the children request involvement themselves.

Parents with little knowledge of their children's birth culture

There were families (02, 13, 16, 23) who exhibited very little awareness about their adopted children's birth country. During the interview with the mother (02) who, along with her husband, had adopted from Sri Lanka and China it became apparent she knew little about Sri Lanka and was unsure whether the country had a national costume or what the main religions were. The parents who had adopted from the Philippines (13) said they had tried to get a book out of the library about the Philippines but there had not seemed to be many around and they had resorted to looking in holiday brochures. In contrast to these examples, the family adopting from Bulgaria (08) had, as part of their adoption preparation, been asked to write a piece about Bulgaria, and from this they had come to the conclusion that Bulgaria did not have a culture of its own. They explained that having studied the history of Bulgaria they had learnt that Bulgaria had been invaded by many different countries and therefore, had become a 'multiethnic' country with no true Bulgarian culture.

Another family who had not encouraged or incorporated into their daily lives aspects of the child's birth culture was the family who had adopted from Peru (23). In their immediate neighbourhood and in the school their son attended, there were very few children from different ethnic backgrounds. They did not feel it was necessary to compensate for the lack of ethnic diversity in their neighbourhood; they did not celebrate festivals from Peru and they admitted they were unsure about what festivals were celebrated in Peru. There were a few artefacts around the living room (two pictures and a statuette) but the parents acknowledged that there was very little else in their lives related to Peru. They suggested their son did not notice the pictures any more and possibly was not aware they were Peruvian. Their explanation for this lack of awareness and activity in aspects of their son's birth culture was that since adopting their son they

had had three birth children, which had meant life had been very full and very hectic. It was unclear whether they had any intention, at a later date, to take an interest in Peru and whether they thought there were any benefits for themselves, their three biological children or their adopted son to celebrate anything Peruvian. These parents possibly think it is more important that their son identify with his immediate peers and feel a part of the local community and to consider himself to be British. This would be fully supported by research findings from both Sweden and Norway which found that adoptees who saw themselves as firstly Swedish or Norwegian were the ones with the better mental health status (Brottveit 2000, Irhammar and Cederblad 2000, Irhammar 2001, Saetersdal and Dalen 2000). However, Irhammar and Cederblad (2000) did also find that an openness and interest in the child's birth country on the part of the adoptive parents seemed to be associated with higher levels of self-esteem in the adoptees.

An issue raised by one family (22) was about which aspects of their children's birth culture was, at any one time, relevant or appropriate to teach the children. They pointed out that in Sri Lanka there are serious divides between the Singhalese and the Tamils which extends to the celebration of different festivals, and had decided they would not raise these issues for the time being:

"There is no point in distressing them [daughters] over something which isn't their set of tensions. One or two of their fellow adoptees are Tamil but there is no point in 'stirring the pot' so to speak." (22)

8.2.3 Talking to children about differences in appearance

A frequent theme in both identity formation and the literature about adoption is that of similarity and difference (Kirk 1981, 1984; McRoy and Zurcher 1983; Tizard and Phoenix 1989). Getting the balance right between acknowledging the differences between parents and children yet at the same time identifying similarities is difficult. Howell (1999) points out that some adoptive parents place a great deal of focus on the child's ethnicity with the best of intentions but she maintains that this can backfire because it can increase the child's feelings of being different. At one of the parent

support group summer parties a mother expressed similar attitudes when she disagreed with parents about aiding young children to trace birth family members¹⁰⁵. She felt that if children as young as nine or ten years who had been adopted at a few weeks old, were wanting to find their birth mother it was more likely to be because they were not fully identifying with the adoptive family and it was more a cry for help and a need for reassurance about being wanted and being loved than a real desire for a reunion.

Explaining difference will mean finding adequate explanations about adoption and ethnicity with the problem of 'getting it right', telling the child in a way they will understand and not causing stress or misunderstanding. 'Getting it right' becomes a dual challenge for parents who have adopted from overseas - acknowledging ethnic, racial differences yet at the same time helping the child fit into both the family and the community in which they now live (Tizard, 1991).

Talking to children about such issues can be difficult and parents can never be certain that children fully understand them and an example of how easily explanations can be misunderstood was given by one of the families who had adopted from Sri Lanka (10). One day the family were looking at old family photographs when they came upon a photograph of the adoptive mother when she was much younger. In the photograph the mother's hair was thick, black and curly, looking very similar to the way her adopted daughter's hair looked. The mother tried to explain that was how her hair looked when she was younger but now she was older her hair had gone white. Her daughter thought about this for a minute and then asked, 'what about my skin? When I get older will my skin go white?' Parents are never able to assume their children have fully understood what they, the parents, have been telling them. However, if the children know the parents will be open and honest with them they will feel comfortable asking questions about issues which concern them.

¹⁰⁵ The researcher attended two Annual Summer Parties organised by the Guatemalan Families Association.

Trying to give their daughter a reason for her 'blackness', another mother (02) explained that it was a consequence of her coming from a very hot country. However, their daughter questioned this because she wanted to know if she was Black because she came from a hot country, why some parts of her body were white and not brown i.e. her palms, the soles of her feet. The mother felt unable to give her a satisfactory answer to this question. This mother went on to explain that, despite both of her children, one from Sri Lanka and another from China, looking different from either of the parents, the children had acquired a number of mannerisms that were similar to those of the parents:

"We have adopted them from completely different countries, never mind different people but there are certain things that they do that I can see in my husband. The youngest will pull a face and I will think, 'that's just the face of Karl' cause of the way she is doing it and I think that's what makes your kids like you in a lot of ways. They are with you all the time and they watch how you do things and how you pull faces and they do it. So that they look like you and there are things that they do that I do. And they talk the same as you as well. They have got your accent and certain things you say they pick it up. The kids can't possible look like us but they have got our mannerisms and phrases that we come out with and it's us'." (02)

"Last night she [daughter] was doing something and I said, 'you look just like your dad', which I know people would say I sound stupid but she does look like him." (02)

Such perceptions about similarities between parents and children is seen as a coping strategy by Dalen (1999) who points out that emphasizing similarity can aid the bond of attachment because a continual emphasis on differences between the parent and the child can act as a constant reminder that the child is not their biological child. Howell (2001) and Dalen (1999) both feel that seeking out similarities between parents and child (rather than focusing on differences) does not mean those parents are denying the child's background.

As discussed in Chapter Six several families have made a return trip to their child's birth country and have used them as an opportunity to discuss similarities and differences between them and their children:

"I think it was a good thing to take them back there [Sri Lanka] because they realise that they come from a hot country and I did explain to them that if you come from a hot country that is why you have got dark skin. You have got dark skin because you come from a hot country and you know it makes your skin tough. We tried to explain it to them like that." (10)

Several of the children in this sample group were still relatively young and were not at an age when it would be expected that they had begun to ask questions about differences in appearance but this does not mean they are not aware of such differences (James 1993). One set of parents commented that this was their experience. Despite never actually asking questions they knew that one of their sons was aware of looking different:

"Stephen was aware from quite an early age of being different, and as he puts it, of being 'brown'. He identified himself as looking different from other children in nursery school. But it didn't seem to worry him particularly one way or another." (14)

8.2.4 How parents learn that their children feel different

Sometimes the parents learned of their child's awareness of difference in an unexpected and disturbing way. For one set of parents it was only when their daughter came home from school and told them about being called names because of her colour that they realised this was an issue that would have to be addressed at more than one level:

"She is aware of her colour. She has had a few problems at school. People do say things about her colour. I can't even remember the situation now but it was some problem with her colour and somebody saying things. I think they were saying she would smell because she was brown. Saying things like she shouldn't be allowed in school." (16)

Not only did they have to address ways to explain the significance of being a different colour but how to handle racist behaviour - matters of racism and how parents deal with these issues are discussed more fully in chapter nine ('living with racism'). The parents felt they needed to get advice about how to handle the situation because they were unsure about whether they were overreacting and making too much of an issue about their daughter's colour. They decided to seek advice from a parent who was from overseas

and had mixed race children. They wanted to find out whether she or her girls had ever had problems and, if they had, how they dealt with them. The advice from the mother was that she did not consider the adoptive parents were making too much of an issue of the incident and her advice was to keep 'on top of the situation'. She advised speaking to the teacher or head teacher, which was what the adoptive mother did. She also went to see the parents of the child, who was being abusive, who were very apologetic and said they would sort it out with their children. It is clear that when parents are first confronted with different situations such as this they often lack confidence about what is the best thing to do - 'getting it right'. They do not want to exacerbate the situation and make things worse for their children but they do not want children to live with continual racist taunts. Despite such situations being objectionable they do give parents the opportunity to discuss issues which they might otherwise have delayed discussing for fear of upsetting their child.

Other parents explained how they had become aware of their children's experiences of feeling different. For one couple it was when their children were on a school trip and telephoned home to say how all the other children were going 'all red in the sun' but they were just 'going darker' (22). Another example which was 'sun' related was when one of the families who had adopted from Sri Lanka (28) were on holiday with their son who wondered why people lay out in the sun all the time:

"In fact he was quite puzzled when he was quite young and we went on holiday to Minorca. There were all these people lying by the pool and he walked down and he says, 'why are they all lying there?' So I told him they wanted to get a suntan. [He said] 'So they want to be like me?'" (28)

Neither of these families felt such discussions were problematic but on the contrary were opportunities to talk openly about difference. One of the fathers suggested that a big advantage of their son looking different from them was that he had always known he was adopted - as did the majority of people they knew. They had not had to face the dilemma of many adoptive parents about when and how to tell the children they are adopted. In fact the parents felt their son was proud of the fact he was adopted and was not

embarrassed about telling people. They knew there had been occasions when their son's friends at school had asked him about his mother and asked him, 'why is she white?' Their son then tells them about coming from Sri Lanka and being adopted - this is despite being what they call a very, very shy child.

One of the families adopting two boys from Sri Lanka (14) lived in a mainly white community and told about how one of their sons had told them:

"I like it in Sito's house, everybody is brown there." (14)

This had surprised them because they were unsure about their son's understanding of the concept of being 'brown' and where his ideas had come from and what it actually meant to him. The friend he was referring to was Pakistani and therefore from a different ethnic/cultural background, but the parents found it intriguing because the boy was not in fact very dark skinned at all, and the adoptive mother commented:

"This is obviously a concept he developed himself because Sito's family are fairer than me in the summer. As far as we are aware no one put this in his head." (14)

They were also keen to point out that their two boys had different levels of interest about looking different than members of their family and the majority of their friends. The parents put this down to differences in temperament, "I just don't think Alex [brother] is concerned yet". This seems to suggest that the parents are aware that one day their son will be 'concerned'.

Having illustrated wide variations in parental awareness and interest in their children's cultural origins we will continue by looking at actual lifestyles of the families to identify practices of ethnic diversity in everyday life and whether having adopted a children from a different ethnic background has changed the parent's identity as a mixed-race family.

8.3 The Impact of Where Families Live

A central argument against transracial/transcultural adoption is that children of colour¹⁰⁶, growing up in white families, suffer identity crisis. It is said that these children may identify more with the white majority, (Rorbech 1991, Saetersdal and Dalen 1991) having been brought up by white people, and that it can be a difficult experience to find an identity with which they feel happy. It has been suggested, therefore, being raised in an environment in which there are varying degrees of multiculturalism will encourage the child to be more confident to explore their own ethnicity (McRoy 1991). These ideas are supported by research which found that when children lived in integrated neighbourhoods, mixed and made friends with groups who had similar ethnic backgrounds, they were less likely to feel different and to have experienced difficulties about their ethnic or cultural or racial origins (Gaber and Aldridge 1994, Crumbley 1999). Children who felt most different were those who lived in white communities with little if any ethnic diversity (McRoy and Zurcher 1983). In addition, if the families live in areas where there are few other families of non-European backgrounds it has been suggested this may send out the wrong message to their children about ethnicity and difference (Gill and Jackson 1983, Bagley 1991, McRoy 1991). Living in areas where there are other families who come from different cultural backgrounds will give children the opportunity to mix and learn from such families about what it is like to be a person from an ethnic minority group living in the UK.

The thirty-one families making up this sample lived in a range of different neighbourhoods and different parts of the country. These neighbourhoods can roughly be grouped into 'types' according to the range of ethnic minority people living in them (Table 8.3.1 has details of neighbourhood types and the number of families living in each).

¹⁰⁶ See Introduction to Part Four for discussion about terminology and labelling of ethnically different groups of people.

Table 8.3.1: Residence of families by neighbourhood type

Neighbourhood Type	Family ID	Total
Ethnically diverse population - London	10, 20, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30	7
London - neighbours - majority white	11, 12, 18, 19, 24, 29, 31	7
White suburb of city with ethnic minority community e.g. Burnley, Derby	16, 22	2
Majority white - little ethnic representation	01, 02, 03, 04, 05, 06, 07, 08, 09, 13, 14, 15, 17, 21, 23	15

In total there were fourteen families who lived in London but of these there were only seven who lived in neighbourhoods that included ethnically diverse communities. For these seven families multiculturalism was such a part of their everyday lives there was no need to make a conscious effort to cultivate friendships with people from different ethnic origins. Their neighbours were from different ethnic origins, their children attended schools with a wide racial mix, shops reflected ethnic pluralism and there were people of different colours and ethnicities walking in the street. Therefore, there was a wide range of opportunities to engage in multiethnic experiences. However, this did not necessarily include ethnic populations representing the ethnicity of their children. The other seven families living in London did not live in neighbours reflecting such ethnic diversity and instead their neighbours were from the majority white population. However, living, working and travelling around London all members of these families have daily opportunities to become aware about ethnic diversity and there will be situations when relationships could be developed with people from different ethnic backgrounds. A similar situation was to be found for two families who lived in towns that had ethnic minority populations although they themselves lived in white neighbourhoods. The opportunities for these families for mixing with and experiencing ethnic diversity is more limited than for those living in London but there were opportunities if they wanted to access them. However, the remaining fifteen families lived in areas that had few non-white residents and their children were the only minority children in the neighbourhood and sometimes also in their school. Therefore, over two thirds of the sample lived in

mainly white neighbourhoods (24 families) but with nine of these families having opportunities within their towns to experience ethnic diversity if they wished. However, almost fifty percent of the overall sample (15 families) lived in totally white neighbourhoods where such opportunities were extremely limited.

To illustrate the multicultural nature of where they lived one of the families adopting from Sri Lanka (28) produced a copy of their son's school photograph in which there were a multitude of nationalities. The majority of the class were second generation Afro-Caribbean but there was also a child from Bosnia, children from Somalia, a girl from Russia, and their son's current 'best friend' was from Iraq. In fact the father made a joke that when looking at the photograph it was more a case of 'spot the Brit.'. They had not chosen to live in this area because they wanted their son to be raised in a multicultural area but had lived there before they had considered adopting from overseas. They did, however, point out that there were no other children from Sri Lanka.

One of the families who lived in a majority white, middle-class neighbourhood (14) was quick to point out that despite living in such a neighbourhood there were a number of residents from different nationalities. This was unlike the previous area in which they lived which, despite being in the city, was mainly made up of older white residents. This would suggest that it cannot be assumed that when adopters live in the centre of cities which have large ethnic minority populations that any of these will be their neighbours and interactions and relationships will develop. This family had found that their children mixed with more ethnic minority children in their present neighbourhood than they had previously. This may be because the children from ethnic minority groups, and living in a mainly white neighbourhood, whether they were adopted and non-adopted, sought out each other's company because they enjoyed the friendship of other children from minority groups; given the choice this is what they prefer. This is speculative and to find out true reasons about why they choose the friendships they do there is a need to talk to children about these issues.

Some parents saw living in a cosmopolitan area as a great advantage because when there were so many different nationalities living in the same area and with a school ethos being multicultural, the children were not seen as different from the rest:

"There are more people who are multicultural and there are so many mixed race children born in this country. I would say there is less racism in London because it is multicultural." (11)

This comment, however, was from a mother who lived in one of the better areas of central London with a majority of white neighbours rather than a multicultural residential area. The matter of multicultural schools was developed further by another mother whose daughter went to a school that had a high ratio of children from ethnic backgrounds (19). However, she noted that despite having these high levels of ethnic mixes in the school it had not in fact been that easy for her daughter to develop friendships outside of school with children from different cultures. Living in central London and attending a well respected Catholic school many families travelled long distances so that their children could have a place in that particular school but at this young age, primary school age, the children did not get the opportunity to mix with each other outside of school time. It was also noted that the actual local community in which the school was situated was predominantly 'white':

"At the school people tend to form into groups of their own country and the children will play with each other. The school is noted for the children playing across classes. I think that might possibly be because the children are all the time looking for other children who they can get along with very easily. And so they look beyond the normal boundaries of age. It may partly be that they are looking for more similarity. Central London is a very particular community and we have to consider all the time whether that is a very positive aspect of living here. It is not quite so 'matey' as the suburbs so you have to balance one thing with the other." (19)

A variation on this theme came from one of the families adopting from Brazil (26) who lived in a multicultural area where their son attended a private school which the father

thought was not representative of the residential area as a whole even though it was in that locality:

"I think he might actually be the only non-Caucasian child in his class but he is not the only one in his school; there are Asian kids in his school. There are oriental kids and black kids, so he is aware of other kids around him but there would certainly be a whole lot more if he went to the state school in the area." (26)

One of the families adopting from Guatemala (15) lived in a white middle class suburban area but felt it was important to let their children experience see or meet people from other cultures. The mother was from New Zealand and was keen that their children were aware about her origins as well as about their own:

"Unfortunately it is quite a white area. It's a shame. We will have to travel to places so they can see that they are not the only ones with, darker skin. We actually try and make them aware of other cultures in general. I have got some books from New Zealand which talks about the Maoris and so on. And I have got some super Maori games." (15)

It becomes clear that where families live will influence the opportunities children have to learn about and experience ethnic diversity. Two further aspects are equally clear and that is that living in a multicultural area does not mean children will learn about their ethnic origins, nor does it necessarily mean that they will mix with children from other ethnic minority groups. Also, there are families living in majority white neighbourhoods whose children have friends from minority populations or whose parents make sure they know about other cultures. However, despite this, it is more likely that living in white neighbourhoods will limit opportunities and living in multicultural neighbourhoods will increase opportunities for families and their children to know and experience, on a daily basis greater levels of ethnic diversity.

Families living in integrated, multiethnic neighbourhoods have far greater opportunities to be around other people who have different cultural heritages than the majority white population which can make a positive contribution to increasing a general awareness about potential diversity of nationalities in the UK. It can also give children and their

families the opportunity to observe how ethnic minority populations manage their individual status of being different. However, there are a number of particular considerations to take into account when thinking about what this means for children who have been adopted from overseas and for their families. Living in a neighbourhood with diverse populations does not necessarily mean there will be opportunities to associate with people from the same country as the children have come from. It is also worth asking, in what ways can the experiences of minority populations, possibly born in the UK and living with their biological parents, be similar to those of children born overseas and brought to the UK as babies to live with adoptive parents? Would it be more beneficial for children adopted from overseas to be given the opportunity to meet people from similar cultural backgrounds? Many parents, whether they lived in neighbourhoods with minority populations or not, were concerned that their children had positive role models and they sought out people who had links with their children's birth country. A number of them made a determined effort to nurture friendships with people with similar ethnic origins to their children and/or had links with their child's birth country.

8.4 The Children's Birth Culture and Everyday Life

8.4.1 Role models

A meaningful way to give children from minority populations a positive sense of themselves is for them to know about successful role models in which to identify (Crumbley 1999, 2003). They can learn about such people via the media but they can also be encouraged to know people from their local community with similar backgrounds to themselves. If children from minority groups can mix with and know people with similar ethnic backgrounds it will help them to be proud of their heritage, and can help them to learn ways of managing difference.

One of the families adopting from China (05) and living in a majority white neighbourhood, had become members of the Chinese Christian Fellowship and much of

their social life involved members of the Chinese community. Religion had been a part of their lives before adoption but once they had made the decision to adopt from China they had contacted a colleague who they knew was involved in the Chinese Christian Fellowship to find out as much as they could about it. They had been warmly welcomed and became regular attendees even before they adopted. Since their daughter has been old enough she has attended the Sunday school on a regular basis and taken part in other organised activities. For example, there were calligraphy lessons and Mandarin lessons. The parents liked the idea that they had been accepted into the Chinese community because this now allowed their daughter to have the best of both worlds:

“She goes to the Sunday school there and she loves it. She plays with all the children and she goes to all their parties. So she’s got a social life within the Chinese community and she has got a social life outside.” (05)

This mother also showed an awareness of the fact that as children grow older there will be a series of issues that have to be addressed, especially during adolescence. For children who have been adopted from overseas there will be a number of additional issues related to identity. Regular contact and participation in the Chinese community was seen as aiding these transitions:

“Keeping her within the Chinese community I feel is giving her both sides. We are fully committed to it and I think that’s important for her. She likes it there and she is at home there.” (05)

Being in regular contact with the Chinese community allowed the family to gain a greater awareness of how it feels to be Chinese growing up in the UK. There was a sub-group of young members of this Christian Chinese Fellowship called the British Born Chinese, the BBCs as they called themselves. This was a self-help group of young people whose parents were Chinese but they themselves had been born in the UK. The aim of the group was to help with difficulties the young people may encounter as a consequence of being from an ethnic minority population but also issues arising from differences in values and expectations between parents and children.

Other families had rather more tenuous links with the Chinese community:

"She is going to have her haircut this afternoon by a Chinese hairdresser. She won't have anyone else do it. She wants to go and see Hom this afternoon. So there is a Chinese link. He has children and he has had them round to see her, but they are older children." (06)

There were several families who had made a point of maintaining links with their children's birth country via friendships. One such family who had adopted from Romania (12) had made a point of cultivating friends from Romania and in particular there were two Romanian brothers who visited the family on a regular basis. The father also talked of having 'adopted' a Romanian student at the college where he worked, and who had become 'like an uncle' to his son. They also had a Romanian friend who had lived in the UK for over twenty years. However, they were quick to point out how much of a multicultural family they were in general because of their lifelong travels around the world and the fact that their own families of origin were from overseas. This family felt they had done too much travelling during the early days of the adoption because they felt they were not giving their son a secure base from which he could feel he belonged and therefore made a conscious effort to reduce drastically the amount of travelling they did.

8.4.2 Food, festivals and artefacts

In addition to nurturing friendships with people from similar cultural backgrounds to those of their children there are other ways in which families can incorporate the birth culture into their everyday lives. The most evident are distinctive foods, celebration of festivals, music and dance, and assorted artefacts. Folk arts and costumes can be great fun, and give the children something concrete to identify as their own and to display to their classmates at school. Several families commented that their children had used their interest and knowledge about their birth country to help them complete a variety of types of school projects. During the interview with the family adopting from Ecuador the two children showed the interviewer two different pieces of work they had done for school which were related to Ecuador and of which they were obviously very proud. Some

children had been encouraged to talk to the class about their country and parents had been invited into schools to take part in ethnic cultural activities. There were mixed feelings about such invitations because as one parent pointed out, on the one hand her daughter was Chinese but on the other hand she was not. The mother felt that the school were expecting her to have more knowledge about China and Chinese culture than she possessed (05). Another mother with a similar invitation had been delighted (24).

Register (1991) and Melina (1993) both suggest that consumer goods, in the form of artefacts from the birth country, and food are ready sources of ethnic symbols and are easy for all families to experience. However, families were often critical, that during their home study assessment, when discussions turned to the need for ethnic/cultural awareness it was often suggested by social workers that parents should regularly eat Chinese/ethnic food or learn to eat with chopsticks. Parents found this both insulting and simplistic. Also, Register (1991) questions whether the buying of culturally specific artefacts from a child's birth country is a lesson about that culture or rather a reflection about consumerism and the importance of ownership in this country?

One of the most accessible festivals in the UK is Chinese New Year and is a popular and well-known celebration in which Chinese and non-Chinese are increasingly taking a part. Therefore, it is no surprise that all families adopting from China had attended such celebrations.

It is probably not enough to think that occasionally eating a meal typical of that eaten in the child's birth country will be a sufficient way to introduce children to their cultural heritage and it does raise questions about what, if anything is this teaching their children about the culture of their country? However, if this is to be the only aspect of the family's cultural awareness and diversity it is, as stated above, an easy and ready ethnic symbol. Several families did eat food from their children's birth country on a regular basis. One family adopting from Sri Lanka (28) said that their son seemed to enjoy Sri

Lankan food which they explained contained lots of coconut, a little like Indian food with subtle flavours using similar spices but in a different way. The parents had learnt about some of the dishes they ate during the time they spent in Sri Lanka as part of the adoption process. They had stayed in small guesthouses where it was common practice to ask the guests what they would like for their evening meal. Sometimes these guesthouse owners would try to cook westernised food but were not very successful at this but if the adopters said they preferred to try something typically Sri Lankan the guesthouse owners took great pride in describing in detail what each individual dish consisted of and this is where they learnt about Sri Lankan cooking.

8.5 Language - Learning the Birth Country Language?

Continuing the theme of identity formation we will look at language acquisition and the importance of knowing the language of a country before one can truly understand the culture of the country. Hutchinson and Smith (1996) suggest language is important because they do not believe the culture of a country can be fully understood without authentic language.

However, from a parent's perspective it is difficult to know when is the right time to start teaching their child the language of their birth country and whether it is better to wait until a child shows an interest, probably as an adolescent or young adult. One of the families who had adopted two children from Sri Lanka felt that learning the language of their country was not something they could force on the children but, they were aware that in the future this may be something they would want to do and in which case they would support them in whatever way they could:

"We will sort them out, head them in the right direction. As long as we have one or two of what we call 'benevolent Sri Lankan friends' that's the best we can do. One of our girls is very bad at language anyway, so the thought of attempting to articulate in a second language is just painful. We have decided that language is an issue we can put on one side. They will never speak it as if born to it. If they want to learn it later they can go and learn it." (22)

As with other aspects of cultural transmission parents were concerned about 'getting it right' and about when and how their children should learn the language. However, there are some parents who had not considered the need for their children to learn the language of their birth country. The relevance of the language of the birth country may not only be important as a means by which children can learn and understand about the culture of their birth country (Lie 2002) but it may have consequences for their future school performance. At a conference in Norway 2001, von der Lieth and Jonasen (2001) and Lagergren (2001) presented research findings about the importance of a child's first language for future language development - speaking and understanding. Lagergren (2001) after working with many intercountry adoptees with language impairments found that despite the ease with which children had learnt the language of their adoptive country in many cases the children were not fully understanding what they were saying or what was being said to them. von der Lieth and Jonasen (2001) studying children who were experiencing learning difficulties in primary school and who had been 'late-adopted', found that the first language the children had been exposed to was not completely forgotten but was subconsciously stored and then forgotten. They found that working intensively on a series of reading and writing exercises in the children's original language and their adopted language saw significant improvements in their scholastic abilities. Therefore, it is apparent that the language of the child's birth country can be important for the child in respect of their future scholastic achievements and may assist in understanding of their cultural heritage.

Two intercountry adoptees, Samwell-Smith (2000) and Jardine (2000), writing as adults, both comment about how their inability to speak the language of their birth country impacted on their feelings about the degree to which they felt they belonged to their birth country. Samwell-Smith (2000), adopted from Chile as a baby regrets not having learnt Spanish as a child but as will be seen below, parents often do encourage their children to learn the language from their birth country but encounter a number of problems. Jardine (2000), adopted from Hong Kong, writes about how she used to feel uncomfortable

amongst Chinese people and that her inability to speak Chinese contributed to the feelings she had of not being 'connected' to Chinese people. It is difficult without speaking to them directly to know whether these two young women would have been keen to learn the language of their birth country as young children. If their parents had sent them for Chinese lessons or Spanish lessons would it have been like many children's experiences of having piano lessons - something many parents feel will be good for them but not something many children appreciate or enjoy.

The remaining of this section will look at whether parents consider the language of their child's birth country as continuing to be important either to them or their children and ways in which some did try to encourage their children to learn their mother tongue. It was apparent that amongst all parents there was awareness that language was an integral part of a person's identity and was a means by which links could be made and maintained with their child's birth country. However, there was much variation in the attitudes of parents about how important they felt it was for their children to be able to speak the language of their birth country. There were parents who had tried to learn the language; there were others who had sent their children to language schools and finally those who felt this was a decision for the children to make when they were older.

8.5.1 Parent's knowledge of their child's birth country language

It is worth considering which, if any, of the parents had any knowledge of the language of their child's birth country and whether they felt it important that they themselves, as well as the children learn to speak this language. Most parents had no knowledge of, and apparently no interest in learning the language of their child's birth country, but there were others who had acquired a limited knowledge. There were, however, two families who described themselves as having linguistic skills. The parents who had adopted their son from Romania (12) between them knew several languages fluently. This, they suggested had helped their son who, despite having no language at the time he was adopted at the age of four years (see above), was now, at the age of ten years, said to be

capable of making himself understood in three different languages. This ability had been facilitated by extensive overseas travel done during the first few years their son had lived with them.

Two families, both adopting from China, felt it was as important for them, as parents to learn the language of their child's birth country as it was for the child to learn the language (05, 24). One of these parents (05) had started learning Chinese as part of their preparation for the adoption. They had visited China once before the adoption as a holiday and the husband had learnt a small number of useful phrases but once they decided to adopt he made a conscious effort to become more proficient. This family felt that having a basic knowledge of Chinese helped them when first introduced to their daughter and they have continued to use a few Chinese words as part of their everyday language. However, the parents had noticed that the phrases that were used on a regular basis in the home had stopped being used by their daughter, now aged four years, when she was outside their home. It seemed that when she was with English children she only spoke in English seeming to differentiate when to use it and when not to use it.

The other parent who had attempted to learn the Chinese language was one of the single adopters (24). She had done a post-graduate course in Chinese Studies that included learning to speak some Chinese, and in addition, she had got a local Chinese lady to teach her Chinese. The mother was equally keen for her daughter to learn to speak the language and had recently, at the age of six years of age, enrolled her in Chinese class. The daughter had, at that point in time, only attended twice and the mother was uncertain about how successful the lessons were going to be. However, the mother felt that if, for whatever reason her daughter did not enjoy the lessons, she would ask the Chinese lady who was teaching her to also help her daughter. The mother was very enthusiastic about China and Chinese culture and was aware that she had become so engrossed in her studies that there was a danger of overwhelming her daughter who may react by having no enthusiasm or interest about China. However, at the time of the interview the

daughter was very proud to be Chinese and loved dressing in her Chinese dress and eating with chopsticks in Chinese restaurants.

Other families who had learnt some of the language of their child's birth country were three of the eight families adopting from Latin America, one from Chile, (19); and two from Brazil, (25 and 26). The adoption process for each of these families had entailed them visiting the birth country for extended periods during which time they had each learnt a limited amount of the country's language. However, not realising they would be spending so much time overseas each set of parents had been unprepared - they had not taken the time to learn the language in advance and even during their stay in the country (Chile and Brazil) they had not made a concerted effort to learn the language because they were always expecting that they would soon be going home. Despite this, a few phrases had been learnt and each family had tried to continue using these after they returned to the UK, but none had been successful. What the parents found was that after they returned home with their children they were more concerned about general child raising issues, which included their children learning to speak English, and they were finding it difficult to remember their limited knowledge of Spanish/Portuguese.

8.5.2 Children and knowledge of their birth country language

There were only two families where parents reported that their children had acquired any language skills before they were adopted and brought to the UK. One of these was a child adopted from Romania who was eight years of age (20) and the other was one of the girls adopted from China at approximately eighteen months (05). When the young boy adopted from Romania first came over to the UK at the age of eight years, his mother spoke to him in Romanian, as did a Romanian friend who was living with them at the time. However, similar to other research findings where children adopted after the age of three years hardly remembered any of their native language (Rorbech 1991), this boy no longer speaks any Romanian preferring to focus on improving his standard of English. The second case (05) was quite unusual because most parents commented about how

their children's language skills were less than would have been expected of children of their age when adopted. It could be suggested that in this particular case the parent's, or at least the father's ability to speak and understand some Chinese (see previous section 8.5.1) had 'allowed' their daughter to acknowledge that she too could speak Chinese. Children with parents who have no knowledge of their birth language will soon get the message that they will not be understood; therefore there is little point in speaking. Also, having parents who can speak their language gives the additional and important message to the children that it is all right to speak, for example Chinese. Children who are being adopted away from their birth country into a country where everything is culturally different may feel that language, as a cultural symbol, will also be necessarily lost.

An explanation given for the poor speech attainment of some adoptees was that as a consequence of being raised in an institution and the lack of one-to-one interaction and attention the children's speech was substantially delayed. An extreme example of this was another of the Romanian children who was four years of age at the time of adoption, and whose parents described him as having no language beyond 'babyish babble' (12). The father commented that his son was also physically malnourished and developmentally delayed at the time of the adoption. Another of the families who had adopted from Romania graphically described their daughter's condition when they first met her:

"She was two and a half and she was just curled into a foetal ball screaming. She was just so frightened and she just screamed all the time. She was about the size of a one year old. She couldn't eat anything, all she drank was vegetable water and she couldn't crawl. She could sit up but she couldn't walk." (17)

When adopting a child with this level of physical developmental delay parents are not surprised that their children are not able to talk. Research has found that parents of children who were older when they were adopted and who had acquired the language of their birth country had tried to help their children retain this language but had, in general failed (Rygvoid 2000).

It might have been expected that the child adopted from Chile at the age of three years (19) would have learned some spoken language. The mother however explained that their daughter spoke no Spanish but it was apparent that she understood what was being said to her when people were speaking to her in Spanish. Therefore, the adoptive parents decided it would help their daughter if they, themselves tried to speak to her in Spanish:

"She wasn't speaking anything really. She understood Spanish perfectly but I think children develop over there [Chile] later and she wasn't having much contact with adults because the children were looked after during the day by a nanna [childminder] because the foster mother was at work. Then I arrived in Chile when she was say, two and three quarters so then there was the confusion of the English coming in. There was a four-year-old in the foster family and he wasn't speaking very much as far as I could see. So there wasn't much language. It took a good six months for language to come out and then it came as English. We spoke to her in Spanish at first, well probably for two or three months and then with nursery school it started going onto English and that is when the Spanish disappeared."
(19)

One of the parents (07), who had adopted from Guatemala, and was a teacher of languages, was sceptical about whether it was possible to acquire and maintain a foreign language if it was not used and heard on a regular basis. She also questioned whether it was realistic for parents to expect children to learn a language via weekly lessons with little or no other input. These ideas are supported by other research in which Chinese children born in the UK were attending weekly 'mother-tongue' classes but their parents felt these were not as satisfactory as they could be (Lie 2002). Parents of adoptees may find that both they and their children will end up equally disappointed at the results of attending weekly language lessons.

This scepticism seems to be well founded on the basis of the experience of four families (19, 24, 25, 29) who sent their children to language schools or language classes. The mother of the young girl adopted from Chile explained about their attempts to help her daughter learn Spanish:

"Our daughter went to Spanish school from aged four to about age six or seven which was very good because it was a Chilean Spanish school. It was very friendly. But she didn't learn to speak any Spanish through that. It is really for bi-lingual children. For a while after that one of the teachers came and tutored her. We don't need her to be bi-lingual, we just want her to have, well to realise it's [the language] importance and perhaps to have a better knowledge and understanding than she would do from just living round here." (19)

Two children, adopted from Brazil (25) and currently aged seven and eight years had also attended language school, but their parents questioned whether they were learning as much as they could be learning. They commented that their daughter appeared to know more Portuguese when she was younger than she did now at the age of nearly nine years. However, they went on to reflect that, possibly because of her age, she was reluctant to share with them how much she did now know. The parents also gave an example of how one day when travelling on the underground they observed their son was listening to a conversation being spoken in Portuguese. When asked what they were saying he denied that he had understood but both parents felt that he had understood what was being said:

"They don't like going particularly, they just go along but Enrico doesn't see any merit in it and it causes a bit of a problem but he goes along but under duress." (25)

All of the children adopted from Sri Lanka were only babies of a few months old when they were adopted and therefore concern about whether there would be communication problems was not an issue. However, whether the children should attempt to learn Sinhalese, the official language Sri Lanka, was rarely raised. This may have been because the official language of Sri Lanka had been English up until 1957 and continued to be widely used especially in the cities. The fact that English was widely used in Sri Lanka was seen as a positive aspect of the adoption experience by the parents. Also it was felt to be advantageous for the future, if or when, the children decide to return i.e. language was not seen as a major barrier as it was by adopters and adoptees from other countries.

It became clear during the interviews that a number of the parents were concerned that both themselves and their children should have an understanding of the language of the child's birth country. However, some parents lacked commitment and did not appear to be prepared to or have the necessary time to spend learning the language themselves and expected that their children could learn a language with only one lesson a week. To learn a new language with any degree of fluency a person would need to have the opportunity to hear and speak the language on a regular basis. This would have been more difficult for some families in this research sample than for others. The families living in London and other cosmopolitan cities would have more opportunity to link with people or groups of people from the child's birth country. The two families mentioned in the previous section (05, 19) who had attempted to make links with members of their child's ethnic origin had seen this as an appropriate and authentic method of learning a foreign language.

It appears that the families who were most concerned about the importance of learning the language of their child's birth were those living in neighbourhoods with other ethnic minority families. There was only one family living in the North East of England, a predominantly white area, who showed any interest in either themselves or their children learning the birth language. It is uncertain whether it is a characteristic of living an insular life within certain neighbourhoods which leaves parents with little awareness about the range of issues surrounding the relevance of the birth language or the range of opportunities which could be extended to their children if they knew the language of their birth country. Or it might have simply been that these were the most recent adoptions and the families had different issues which were concerning them more at the present time but as the children became more settled in to the family the adopters may become more interested in different aspects of their children's birth culture, including language. However, another influencing factor might be the child's birth language because learning to speak Chinese may be more difficult than learning Spanish. Certainly learning to read Chinese script would be more difficult than learning to read, for example, Spanish. During the interviews parents were not asked to elaborate about the reasons why they made certain decisions because the focus of the interviews was on a wide range of issues.

However, it would be interesting to examine 'why' parents chose not to teach their children or to learn the language of their child's birth country themselves. This could be done as part of a series of follow-up interviews when certain of issues could be examined and discussed in greater detail and depth with the parents.

It may also be worth noting at this point about the role of parent support groups regarding language acquisition. For those groups who responded to the original postal questionnaire (Mason 1999), which asked about the group's main objectives, none mentioned an aim to encourage parents and their children to learn the language of the children's birth countries. However, this does not automatically mean that parents were not able to discuss this matter with each other during the support group meetings which are organised with the aim of giving parents the opportunity to share experiences and many may have discussed the merits or otherwise of learning their child's birth language.¹⁰⁷

It can be seen that the role of the birth language can be significant when the children are still young because of the potential benefits this can have on a child's performance at school (von der Lieth and Jonasen 2001; Lagergren 2001) and in the future when they may want to return to their birth country (Samwell-Smith 2000; Jardine 2000). Also, the learning of the language by the parents and the parents wishes for the children to learn the language may have symbolic meanings about the value placed on the their birth country and the culture of the country.

8.6 Religion

The function of religion in relation to an analysis of identity and ethnic identity in particular is often neglected (Kirton 2000a) yet religion plays a big part in the lives of the people from many of the sending countries - more so than religion in the UK today.

¹⁰⁷ Chapter 10 examines the role of parent support groups in more detail.

Also, as part of the process in domestic adoption birth parents, when they relinquish a child, can state whether they have any preference about the religion of the family that their children will be placed with. In this research the families were not asked directly about the role of religion in their lives and initially it was not considered to be particularly significant. However, as the interviews progressed and consideration of the issues began it became clear that the religious heritage of the children rarely matched that of their adoptive parents. The majority of families were from different denominations of the Christian faith, including two Church of England ministers, and a family who were Jehovah's Witnesses. However, many of the families were not practising their faith on a regular basis but did believe in the underlying doctrines of Christianity. In addition to these families there are two Jewish families, one adopting a child from Romania and the other adopting a daughter from China, both of whom are raising the children in the Jewish faith.

Three out of the eight families adopting from Sri Lanka were practising Christians (10,22,27) but for the other five families religion did not play a significant role in their lives. One of the fathers (27) is a Minister in the Church of England so that religion is a major part of the family's daily life. However, the father was eager to point out that he and his family were not in any way dismissive of the values underpinning other religions and acknowledged that his adopted daughter would have been raised in a religion other than Christianity if she had remained in Sri Lanka¹⁰⁸:

"Presumably if she had grown up in the state she was born in, in Sri Lanka, she would have jogged round to the Hindu Temple from time to time. She would have grown up as a Hindu. What we have had to say to her about Sri Lanka actually has been more about Buddhism because we both have been a bit more acquainted with Buddhism from our own interests. But this isn't confusing to her, I hope. She goes to church and enjoys that but we are not very devote and pious: not very intense sort of evangelical family." (27)

¹⁰⁸ In Sri Lanka approximately 70% of the population are Buddhists; 15% Hindu, 8% Christian and 7% Muslims www.odci.gov/cia/publications

The family was as much concerned with the philosophy of religion and the seamless boundaries between faiths as they were about the dogma surrounding religions. This, they felt, enabled them to embrace the beliefs of other religions and this included one of their daughter's god-parents being of the Hindu faith. In a similar way, two other of the families (22, 28) acknowledged that there was very little chance that their children, if they had remained in Sri Lanka, would have been raised as Christians:

"By their names, their own names, they are both clearly Buddhists by background." (22)

For several other parents the choice of godparents was also seen as an opportunity to choose people who would play a significant role in the children's lives in the future. As mentioned above it had been religious belief that had been important for the one of the families adopting from Sri Lanka (27) when they had been choosing godparents for their daughter but for others it was, as the family adopting two girls from Ecuador (29) explained:

"We wanted the children to have godparents because I think it's a lovely role when you have somebody special, just for you, that are not family, who would always take special care of them, and we chose four friends and they had to be single with no children! That was the criteria cos I thought I didn't want anyone who already had children because they won't think the best of my children! It's been a lovely relationship, really, really nice. One of the godmothers is adopted herself." (29)

The addition of a godparent who was also adopted was a bonus and had been of considerable help because the girls had felt at ease talking to her about being adopted. However, this was a domestic adoption where the child and the parents were from similar ethnic backgrounds:

"It's a bit different for Sandra because she is white and her mum's white so they are taken as her family." (29)

One family, who had adopted their daughters from Sri Lanka when the two girls were just months old (22), mentioned that not only did they have a religious faith but they also felt

they had a belief in what they described as 'fate'. They felt that not only were they 'lucky' to have been able to adopt their daughters but that the youngest daughter was also very 'lucky' because, not long after they all got back to the UK she was found to have a major heart defect from which she would have died if she had not received specialist medical treatment:

"I honestly reckon this was all done for a purpose and I am quite happy about it. At the religious level we sensed something but we didn't understand it." (22)

One of the families who lived in central London (28) had a Sri Lankan Buddhist temple close by and they had met with the chief monk on occasions and he had recently written them a letter in support of their attempt to adopt a second child from Sri Lanka:

"He thinks it is wonderful that we are adopting and any child we have the monks would be able to talk to about their home in their language if we wanted it. It was really nice and they were really supportive." (28)

They were very impressed at how welcoming the monks had been and they had not felt under pressure to attend the temple or take up the Buddhist faith. The adoptive father had come from a strict Salvation Army family but he was no longer a member. The family now belongs to the Church of England. However, they do not attend on a regular basis mostly and the reason given was that their son does not like attending and gets very restless and 'bored'. The Pentecostal church supported the orphanage from which they had adopted their son and the family had attended one of their churches back in the UK but they had felt no affinity with the religion despite the services being 'lively and bright'. They had also tried other different styles of churches but did not attend any of them on a regular basis.

For at least two of the families (11, 14) religion and attendance at church had been a means by which they had quite cynically tried to gain access to a preferred school - neither parent was proud about this but felt that the interests of their child's education came first. As was explained by one of the mothers:

"We went to church for a while. This is a terrible reason really but they had a very good school attached and we started going there. A bit obvious really when you take a three and a half along to the church all of a sudden. But we didn't get into that school anyway. But then I did carry on for a bit anyway. I thought it's nice for her to know a religion." (11)

It could be suggested that it would be unrealistic to try to bring a child up in a different faith to other members of the family. It is unlikely that they would want to be made so different and this would not enhance the bonds of attachment and would be an 'acknowledgement of difference' taken one step too far. However, what is significant is that religion and religious festivals were not often used as a means by which to teach children about their birth culture yet this is seen as appropriate, interesting and generally, easily accessible method for learning about different cultures (Melina 1993, Register 1991, Shukla 2003). Religion could also be raised as an issue that does not appear to be taken into account by the birth country. Specifically in the case of the young Jehovah's Witnesses couple who had applied to adopt in the UK but who were advised that they were unlikely to have a child placed with them because of their religion. They had no problem when adopting from Sri Lanka because any form which had to be completed and which included questions about religious beliefs used very broad categories such as Christian, Muslim, Hindu. As Jehovah's Witnesses are part of the Christian faith religion was not an issue. However, this research is unable to know what questions agents in other sending countries ask about religion. Authorities in the sending countries may take religion into account and make their decisions with full knowledge about which religious faith the child would be raised in but it is unlikely that the birth mother will have been asked her preference about what type of family or placement she would want for her child as is the case in domestic adoption in the UK. More and more the wishes of birth mothers are taken into account at all stages of the adoption process in the UK and there is no reason why birth mothers in sending countries should not be given the same degree of consideration and concern. However, there are many orphanages in sending countries that are run by religious denominations and they are more likely to be concerned about the spiritual upbringing of the children they place for adoption, as was the case in the past in the UK.

8.7 Summary and Discussion

This chapter has looked at ways in which children adopted from overseas learn about and experience the culture of their birth countries. The investigation has been from the perspective of the parents and how parents encourage their children to know about the culture of their birth country. It became clear that in the majority of cases parents were aware they had a task to do and a responsibility to their children but in many cases they were unsure what it was they were aiming for or how they were to go about it. Many spoke about 'getting it right' either when they spoke about the way they managed issues or the choice of which issues they considered important.

According to Crumbley (2003) 'love is not enough' and however good the parenting skills of the parents, there will be continued need to take into account the ethnicity of the child and a need to incorporate and value the child's racial/ethnic identity and history. The debate about identity cannot be ignored because a child needs to develop and maintain a positive ethnic identity. However, firstly we need to ask, what is it exactly that constitutes an 'ethnic identity' and how important is it that children have an ethnic identity? As outlined in the introduction to part four there are protagonists who believe that the better way of coping in a majority white population is to identify with the host country, neighbours and local community in preference to identifying with a minority group. What cannot be denied is that intercountry adoptees will, at some time, have the additional task of negotiating multiple roles and there may be occasions when they have a sense of cultural conflict. But what is equally clear is that children are active not passive recipients of a socialisation process and therefore responses to information will vary. Families may be actively involved in aspects of their children's birth country but this will not guarantee the children will have similar levels of interests. In support of this there were parents who commented about differences between their children about how they responded or took an interest in matters related to their ethnic heritage or the culture of their birth culture.

Shukla (2003) writing in the OAH India Newsletter gave examples of how she was trying to help her adopted children to develop awareness of their birth country and its culture and was encouraging them to take a pride in their heritage. However, she was equally sure that she did not want this to become an obsession either for herself as a parent or for her children. Instead she was aiming to create an atmosphere in which her children would feel comfortable in exploring aspects of their birth country and its culture. The availability of such articles provides current and prospective adopters with ideas about ways in which they themselves can introduce their child's birth culture into their lives. The level of interest children have in their birth country may vary over time and there may be periods during which they lose interest and enthusiasm about their birth country. However, participation in culturally specific activities by the family as soon as the children come to live with the family, laid positive foundations that can be built upon or returned to when the children wish to. It is also worth noting from research of Korean children adopted by German families that a national identity evolved over a period of time and it was not until they were older (adolescence, or early adulthood) that they began to see themselves a partially Korean (Kuhl 1985)¹⁰⁹. Therefore, parents should not assume that children who currently have no interest would not develop an interest at a later date.

If a significant part of a person's identity is socially constructed the environment in which children live has to have a major impact upon their identity, both social identity and personal identity. An important question to ask is whether it can realistically be expected that parents can aid the construction of a social identity for their children which takes into account the child's ethnicity without the child having points of reference from which to consolidate information. If a family lives in a community where the majority of the inhabitants are not from a similar cultural background to that of the child where are they to learn by example what it means to have a particular ethnic heritage? Recommendations to live in and to mix with people who represent the child's origins are

¹⁰⁹ Including extensive literature about adult Koreans who were adopted as children by American families – Cox 1999, 1999a; Freundlich and Lieberthal 2000; Kim 2003; Volkman 2003; Yngvesson 2000, 2003.

often found in literature from the USA discussing transracial adoption. However, in the USA transracial adoptions are most likely to involve children from a small number of ethnic groups (e.g. Afro-Caribbean's, Hispanics) and where there are many cities that have large numbers of people from these ethnic populations. Unlike in the UK where there are fewer cities with large minority populations and there are even fewer, probably none, which have significant numbers of people from the many different countries the children in this sample come from. There was only one example, in this sample group, of a family who mixed on a regular basis with people from their child's country of origin and this was a family who had made a point of seeking out representatives of their local Chinese community. There were no families who had moved to live in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood because they felt this would be advantageous for their children¹¹⁰. However, to suggest that living in ethnic diverse neighbourhoods will naturally lead to the child becoming part of that community is unsatisfactory and inaccurate. It is far more complex and what is needed is active encouragement and involvement on behalf of the parents to seek out people or situations, in which relationships can develop and be nurtured as role models for their children.

It may also be simplistic to assume that it was parents living in multiethnic neighbourhoods who were the most likely to provide their children with experience of ethnic diversity or were the ones encouraging them to learn about the culture of their birth country. This was illustrated by examples of adoptees attending schools where the majority of the children were from minority populations but outside school they had little or no contact with ethnic populations. There was another example where a child attended a school with very few children from ethnic minority populations but on a day-to-day basis in his neighbourhood he had friends with minority ethnic heritages. Despite the fact that some children live in multicultural neighbourhoods but do not mix on a day-to-day basis with other children from minority groups what they do have is the opportunity, if or when they wish, to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds, unlike children who live in mainly white areas. However, there were parents living in white

¹¹⁰ Those who lived in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods had done so before the adoption.

neighbourhoods who went out of their way to interact and mix with people from similar backgrounds as their children. Clearly it is not enough to assume that the neighbourhood in which adopters live dictates how much interaction they will have with people from ethnic minority populations.

During discussions about trying to learn the language of their child's birth country or about trying to encourage their child to learn the language many parents were aware that there was little, if any, chance that either would become proficient. However, at the same time parents felt it was good to be seen to be making an effort and felt that what they were doing as much as anything was indicating to their children that they valued different aspects of their culture. They also felt that they were laying the foundations for a time in the future when their children may have more interest in learning the language.

Having examined a range of opportunities in which parents could incorporate aspects of their child's birth culture into their every day lives it was apparent that there were those who knew little about their child's birth country and the parents did not see themselves as an interracial family. From earlier chapters in part three it was equally apparent that all families were happy to talk to their children about adoption and the fact that the children had come to live in England from another country. However, what was less clear was how much many of the families identified with their children's ethnicity.

Even for families who appear to actively seek out ways in which to engage with the birth culture it could be asked whether any of these activities are anything more than symbolic actions and what is their purpose? It could be suggested that even though the manner in which parents introduced their children to the culture of their birth country was little more than a range symbolic activities, what such activities could do was to keep open lines of communication between parents and their children. The children will be aware that their parents take an interest in a range of issues related to their birth country and are supportive in any interests they may have about their birth culture. Their birth country

will not become the new adoption secret, something not to be mentioned, in the same way that in the past 'adoption' itself was the family secret and was not openly talked about. Therefore, an underlying theme running through the interviews was that of openness in communications between parents and children that appeared to be based on mutual respect. Parents were proud of their achievements of adopting a child(ren) from overseas and it was not something they were ashamed of and nor something they tried to hide from people.

What was also apparent was the uncertainty on behalf of the parents about the advantages and disadvantages of being actively involved in the children's birth culture and there was concern about 'getting it right'. It has been suggested that there is a need for parents to be made aware, during the preparation and assessment period, of the importance of the child's birth country (Beckett et al 1999). During their research with families who had adopted from Romania, Beckett et al (1999) found it was parents who had had local authority Home Study Assessments who were the most likely to believe in the importance of Romanian culture and identity. Parents who had private home studies were more likely to place less value on their child's birth culture and therefore they concluded that local authorities better prepared parents about a wide range of identity issues that need to be addressed by parents adopting a child from overseas. However, these results are not supported by the findings from the small sample in this thesis because the parents who had private home study assessments were as likely to take an interest in their child's birth culture as parents having had home study assessments done by the local authority. A significant factor may have as much to do with the level of experience of the individual social workers undertaking these assessments rather than whether a local authority employed them. It was the experience of several families in the current study that it was the local authority social worker's first intercountry adoption assessment and parents commented that the social worker had little knowledge about procedures or about country-specific cultural characteristics. In contrast, independent social workers who were doing the private home study assessments, were found to be more experienced and more knowledgeable and consequently considered more supportive during the process. Similar opinions were found amongst parents adopting

from overseas and living in Scotland where there was praise for individual social workers but at the same time, many were found to be lacking in experience (Selman and Mason 2003). How much the situation has changed since the families in both of these studies had their assessments done is unclear. Looking at the annual numbers of overseas adoptions in Scotland (Selman and Mason 2003) and in England and Wales (Brennan 2000, Selman 2002) it can be seen that they are still relatively low therefore, the experience individual social workers employed by the local authority will have gained over the interim years is not likely to have increased substantially.

However, an issue which was not raised but is worth noting is the ethnicity of the social worker in question because Small (1994) suggests that black social workers were more likely to place greater emphasis on ethnic origins than white social workers. This will have implications about whether social workers are more or less likely to feel it necessary to relay to parents the importance of teaching their children about their cultural heritage. Kirton (1998) discussing findings from his research with trainee social workers found differences between white social work students and 'minority ethnic' social work students in their attitudes to race and adoption. He concluded that there was a need for 'increased awareness of minority ethnic experiences on the part of white social workers' (p15).

This leads to questions about what constitutes adequate preparation for prospective adopters and the role of local authorities. A major problem for local authorities is the small number of overseas adoptions they have and therefore developing expertise within departments or as individual workers will continue to be problematic. However, at an administrative level it is worth considering ways in which social workers can gain more expertise about intercountry adoption and secondly the role of preparation groups or classes for parents. It is no longer legal to have a home study assessment undertaken by independent/private social workers and many sending countries will no longer accept such assessment reports. However, within the parameters of the *Adoption and Children Act 2002* it is now possible for the setting-up of specialist overseas adoption agencies. If

a small number of intercountry adoption agencies were to be set up within the UK they would soon build-up the necessary range of expertise and knowledge-base to provide parents with guidance about a wide range of issues associated to the pre and post adoption phases.¹¹¹

An alternative way in which parents can gain a better knowledge about the culture of their child's birth country would be to join an overseas adopters parent support group. Parent support groups provide opportunities for parent to meet and to share experiences and talk through ideas about issues related to ethnicity cannot help but be beneficial to all family members. Many also produce newsletters and organise seminars/conferences as alternative ways in which parents can learn about a range of issues relevant to intercountry adoption. The role of parent support groups is discussed in more detail in chapter 10 but firstly there will be a look at a linked issue of how parents help children to understand about living with racism (Chapter 9).

¹¹¹ See Chapter 10 for further discussion about the development of specialist intercountry adoption agencies.

Chapter 9: Living with Racism

9.1 Introduction

This chapter will look at racism and how parents see this impacting on their lives as a family and the lives of their children. It is important to consider such issues because it has been suggested that regardless of how much parents may encourage their children to have a positive ethnic identity the impact of racism can cancel out any work they have done (Bagley 1991) and as much as parents may try to protect their children 'love is not enough' (Crumbley 2003) and there will be occasions when they will hear racist comments.

A major argument against transracial and transcultural adoption, and by implication ICA, is that parents who are a different colour and/or from a different ethnic background cannot adequately teach their children the skills needed to effectively cope with the discrimination and prejudice they will encounter at some time during their life. It is for this reason that advocates of same race adoption feel that black families are more able to provide their children with a greater awareness of racism and the ability to deal with such experiences (Chestang 1972, Chimezie 1977, Small 1986, 1991; Barn 1999). These writers suggest that the race and culture of parents have an impact on their ability to help their children develop positive racial or/and cultural identities and on their ability to deal with racism. However, it is clear that some white families have been claimed to have successfully parented children from different racial and cultural backgrounds (Hayes 1993, Tizard and Phoenix 1994, Thoburn et al 2000). A critical examination of the growing body of empirical research claiming that transracial adoptions do not negatively impact on adoptees can be found in Park and Green (2000) and Simon and Altstein (2000) summarise their findings after more than thirty years of studying transracial and intercountry adoptions.

The term race and racism has attracted much theoretical and academic discussion (Kirton 2000a, 2000b, Banton 1987, Prevatt-Goldstein and Spencer 2000, Back and Solomos 2000, Freundlich 2000, Montagu 1997) which I do not wish to embark on here but will consider racism as different types of discriminatory behaviour based on the inherited physical appearance of the recipient of the prejudice and discrimination. It will also be taken as accepted that institutional racism is endemic in the UK today (MacPherson 1999) and children will receive negative messages about being black and are most likely to experience racist attitudes/prejudices or behaviours/actions at some point in their lives.

A further issue which needs to be raised is that of labelling, and in this case labelling all ethnic minority groups or people of colour as 'black' especially when they themselves do not see or call themselves 'black'. Children may realise from an early age that they are not white but it does not follow therefore, that they think of themselves as 'black'. There seems no valid reason to expect children to label themselves as 'black' if this is not how they are labelled by their family, or their peers (Banton 1987; Beishon et al 1998; Modood et al 1997). This was an issue raised during one of the interviews when a nine-year-old was listening and taking part in the discussions (02). When, at one point the mother and the interviewer began to talk about terms used to categorise people and gave the example of calling non-white people 'black', the girl was obviously upset by this and, despite being a very quiet child, spoke up and said she did not like being called 'black' because she was not 'black' but was brown. Her mother tried to explain to her that it was not white people who had been the first to use the term and gave examples of different words that had been used in the past to refer to anyone who was not white. It is in situations like this that it becomes apparent how easy it is to offend and how upsetting labels can be. The issue of how 'black' children and adults perceive themselves has been the subject of many debates (Parker and Song 2001, Small 1994) and whether it is right for 'white' parents to adopt children from culturally and ethnically different backgrounds has, at times been contentious (Ngabonziza 1991, Small 1991, Fogg-Davis 2002, Parks and Green 2000).

The aim of this chapter is to review some of the many forms of racism experienced by the parents and their children and examines different responses. I shall also look at how different ethnic groups attract different degrees and different types of racism (Pertman 2000, Prevatt-Goldstein and Spencer 2000) and consider whether positive comments and positive stereotyping can be considered as a form of racism (Howard 1999). A number of issues will be considered including different types of racism that have been experienced, from whom the racism has come, how racist experiences have been responded to by either the children or the parents, and finally to whom the children turn for support. Many of the parents were aware that at the present time their children were still young and protected by their families but they were equally aware that when their children start school and particularly when they go to High School, this may change and they may become more vulnerable. Freundlich and Lieberthal (2000) found that racism became more intense during the High School years.

For all of the families the issue of race and possible experiences of prejudice had been raised during the Home Study Assessment so all families were aware that they might encounter negative responses and these could be from family and friends as well as people outside of their immediate circle. As one mother said:

"I have been waiting for it and I have no doubt it will come. Perhaps in the schools." (03)

After talking with all the parents it was clear that there exists a wide range of experiences and feelings about racism and responses to racism. Several of the families adopting from China felt very sensitive about racism and racist comments in contrast to those adopting from Sri Lanka and Latin America where none of the families felt racism was a big issue in their lives. These differences may be due to the actual amounts or type of racism experienced or it may be to do with the length of time the children and parents have been together as a family. It could be suggested that when the child first comes to live with the family the parents are more aware of the new situation and are more sensitive to comments being made. It may be the case that families in which children have lived for

a number of years become slightly less aware of, or immune to, racist comments. This will have as much to do with a growing confidence in their role as parents and with the general acceptance of the family within the community and more especially by the people who mean the most to them i.e. family, friends and others.

None of the families who had adopted children whose appearance was similar to their own and the community in which they live i.e. white parents with white children had had racist comments directed at them.¹¹² However, two of the families adopting from Romania (17, 20) did comment that their children had experienced bullying/teasing about being adopted. However, part of the teasing/bullying about adoption did, in one case, include the taunt, 'go back to Romania'¹¹³ but the mother had not considered this to be a racist remark. Two other families, one adopting from Sri Lanka (16) and another from Ecuador (29) also said adoption rather than race had been an issue for them.

9.2 Racism from People in the Receiving Country

Different types of racist behaviours found in this sample include name-calling, and comments about appearance, which included questioning about differences in appearance between family members. There were no experiences of physical abuse motivated by racism but this does not detract from the fact that even non-violent racist behaviours can feel threatening and cause anxiety. The name-calling and other comments about physical appearance were experienced in a number of different situations including at school, walking in the street, and playing outside. They were also found to come from complete

¹¹² These are four families each adopting one child from Romania, one family (with two children) from the USA, and one family from Bulgaria.

¹¹³ Links to asylum seekers - at the time of the interviews the numbers of asylum seekers in the UK was small and was not regularly raised by the media as being a problem. However the situation today has changed and it could be suggested that in the future intercountry adoptees living in areas where asylum seekers have been relocated could face problems of discrimination. Children adopted from East European countries and especially Roma (gypsy) children may experience prejudice and discrimination in the future. Or perhaps Roma children may experience less discrimination in England than they would back home in Romania.

strangers, friends, and neighbours and there were parents who noted comments coming from members of other minority groups.

9.2.1 Racist comments from other children

One of the families adopting from China (05) identified racist comments made to their daughter, 'I came up against racism, out and out racism, whilst attending a Mother and Toddler session'. One of the young children came up to her daughter and said, 'you don't belong here, you're foreign' and then started to push the girl away. The mother felt that this was not the language of a two-year-old and not something that would be expected from a child so young. It was suggested by the mother that the child was repeating something the child had overheard. In this particular case the mother was proactive and approached the offending child to say that her daughter did belong here although she did not raise the issue with the child's mother:

"I didn't start anything with the mother because it's just not worth it. I should perhaps deal with it, but I didn't quite know how to deal with it. So I thought right, I'll just let things lie but if it comes up again I'll take the mother to one side and have a word with her." (05)

This response could be labelled 'semi-passive' in that the mother was prepared to make a stand, albeit a small one, but was not prepared to make an issue of what had happened by speaking directly with the parent of the child she said that she:

"...was going to have a word with the group leader but I didn't. I thought well I'm not going to involve her it's not necessary. Things might escalate and I'm not going to make her (daughter) the centre of attention." (05)

In a similar vein, other adoptive parents suggested that the origins of racist comments from very young children had to have been heard from adults, most likely the parents:

"It's the parents who put the ideas into the children's minds. You can't protect your children from racism." (07)

However, Hewitt (1996) suggests that racism from young children is not necessarily a direct reflection of views learned in the home and that parents should not automatically be blamed for the racist views of their children. Connolly (1998 p5) notes the active role children play in managing, adapting and reproducing discourses on 'race'. However, it would seem that for children as young as two or three years the impact of the wider society would be minimal compared to the influence of the family but outside influences cannot be denied. Children watch television, mix with other children and other adults and will observe their behaviour and attitudes.

Many parents are keen that their children are accepted and not identified as different but there can be problems when the children start attending playgroups (as above) or when they go to school. It appeared that for some parents anything which is seen as drawing attention to them and their children is avoided at all costs. The mother in the above case went on to explain how other members of the toddler group they attended could resent her daughter:

"I want to try and get them used to the fact we have a Chinese daughter, because possibly it is a big thing for them and you have got to try and see it from their side. They have got an intruder and it was a popular playgroup and perhaps some people were turned down because there weren't enough places and they see my daughter come in. Trying to look at it from somebody else's point of view. Trying to look at things positively." (05)

The week following the above incident there was again trouble between the two children. This time, however, it was the Chinese adopted daughter who was seen hitting out at the child who had been doing the 'name calling' the previous week. From this point in time the adoptive mother felt there was an uncomfortable atmosphere and within a few weeks they had discontinued attending. The main justification for not going was that the little girl was not getting a great deal out of the visits.

A similar incident of name-calling had been experienced by one of the girls adopted from Guatemala (31). She had been called a 'chinky' and this had been in the presence of her

mother and both had found the experience unpleasant. However, the mother told of how very proud she was about the way her eight-year-old daughter had responded. Her daughter had turned round to the name caller and said that she was not Chinese but Guatemalan. The mother had tried to elaborate about how her daughter was not Chinese but she felt this had not been fully understood by the name caller. Despite being proud of her daughter's response, the mother said she had felt sad that by denying she was Chinese her daughter was in some way being negative about people who were Chinese.

There were other families (06, 24) who experienced their children being called 'chinky' - but this was not always seen as a racist slur by the parents. One such name-caller was the daughter of a neighbour, who when told about the prospective adoption from China responded with, 'Err, a chinky!' The mother had reprimanded the girl but, at the time of the interview, the girl was still refusing to acknowledge the adoptee from China and has on occasion crossed the road to avoid the family when she saw them approaching. The other mother (24) told about children at school pulling their eyes into a squint to taunt her daughter. They had gone into the school to see the classroom teacher and explain what had happened and how upset her daughter was by the incident. There had been an immediate and positive response with the children involved being made to apologise to the child.

9.2.2 Racist comments from ethnic minority children

A variation on the theme of name-calling was when the comments came from those who were themselves, possibly for the first time, in a minority position. Two families whose children had experienced racist comments from children who had come to live in the UK from other European countries gave examples. The first case involved a boy adopted from Sri Lanka (14) who had been 'called names' by a German boy at school:

"I think he was called a 'chocolate drop' or something. It wasn't meant unkindly. It wasn't meant to be cruel but it was." (14)

The response from the parents had been to point out to the 'name-caller' that this was a hurtful thing to say and was not acceptable behaviour. They decided not to tell the child's parents because 'they would be mortified' and they also felt the child was 'very bright' and was able to take on board why it was not right to call people names. They felt they had managed the situation in the best way and not getting the parents involved was the right thing to do because it had meant that 'the whole thing was over in a flash'.

The second case involved another child adopted from Sri Lanka (02) where a Norwegian boy in her class at school called the child a 'Paki'.¹¹⁴ The nine-year-old girl who had been called a 'Paki' actually had no idea what this meant and had asked her parents when she got home from school, which is how the parents found out about the incident. They explained to their daughter that the term 'Paki' was short for Pakistani. They went on to suggest that to be called a Paki did not necessarily mean the person was trying to be nasty, giving the example of how people refer to going to the 'Paki's' when they mean they are going to the corner shop which may or may not be owned by a Pakistani or going to the 'Chinkies' when they are going to the Chinese restaurant:

"I tried to explain you go to the chip shop you say, 'I'm going to the chippy.' You just shorten the words. And I said the next time he calls you Paki all you have got to do is be nice, smile at him and say, 'well actually I'm not from Pakistan, I am from Sri Lanka'. So he did call her it the other day and she said what I told her to say and his response was, 'well who cares?'. And she said, 'well I do actually, because I am proud of my country.' He walked away." (02)

Despite feeling they had given their daughter an explanation as to why this sort of thing happened and that it was not a matter to be too concerned about, the mother went to see the headmistress because she did not want the same thing to occur again and she also felt it would be best if the school were aware of what had happened. During the interview, in which the two adopted girls were present, the child from Sri Lanka (aged 9 years) talked about her experiences in the local park where there were a group of boys who

¹¹⁴ Norway has no Pakistani population and have a more homogenous population than the UK, so the boy would have little experience of being with children who looked different from himself

often quizzed her about where she was from. The mother interrupted and explained that they were not being nasty, just curious but went on to say that prejudice may be experienced in the future:

“I have explained to her that she might come up against prejudice because she is black, because a lot of people are silly. I said it’s not being black, but people with red hair get called names and people who wear glasses.” (02)

9.2.3 Neighbours and racism

One family (03) who had yet to experience any overt racism suggested that part of this may have been a consequence of coming from a small town where the family was known to many people. Everyone in the local community knew about their status as adoptive parents and about their adopted children and, for example, when they went to the Mother and Toddler group for the first time they got a ‘wonderful reception’ with everybody making a big fuss. This is in contrast with the experience of the family (05) discussed above who had felt unwelcome by the members at their local Mother and Toddler group. The family adopting from the Philippines (13) expressed similar sentiments about the advantages of being in the minority and being valued for who they were rather than where they were from or the colour of their skin. They lived a very isolated life in the country where the nearest village was a few miles away. However, they felt that because their two children were the only minority people in the whole of the area and the parents were well liked, the children were accepted by everyone - they were seen as the children of the parents and no different from other children. The children take on ‘honorary white status’ and such strategies may be rewarded by a lack of overt hostility or racism (Kirton 2000a p49). Research by McRoy and Zurcher (1983) about transracial adoption in the USA found that ‘black’ children were more accepted if they were few in number but the children themselves would have preferred their neighbourhood to be more racially mixed.

However, one family (14) did identify their neighbours, as the source of racism and this was one of the families adopting from Sri Lanka. They had experienced hostility from one of the neighbours where they had lived previously - a white suburb of a large city.

However, the family also pointed out that there were differences in how people handle situations and suggested there was a cultural element to this. They gave the example of a Punjabi neighbour (where they lived currently) who was very forthright when asking detailed questions about their family circumstances and this was done in the presence of the adopted children. The parents were unsure how to handle the situation and felt uncomfortable about answering all the questions whilst the children were there. However, they decided to be as open as possible because they did not want to appear rude nor did they want any suggestion that they had something to hide or that they were ashamed of their children or the adoption. The parents felt that this degree of directness illustrated cultural differences and gave further examples of people they had known from Sri Lanka and China who had been equally direct in their questioning.

9.2.4 Tension between ethnic minority groups

Two interviewees gave examples of racism and ethnic minorities in their neighbourhoods. As one father explained, the tensions were greatest between ethnic groups rather than between blacks and whites but he did acknowledge that there were some resentment amongst certain segments of the white population:

"There is a lot of latent racism in our neighbourhood but it is all so very complicated because there are so many communities. We have Nigerians, West Africans, a huge Turkish community, the Vietnamese, Chinese and so on. So it's such a huge volatile mix. Lots of Caribbean people. The main racial problem in this neighbourhood is what you would call the poor whites, which are the working class, sometimes unemployed and living on the state have a lot of residual dislike of the huge influx of people from different backgrounds. That's the most significant racial difficulty." (27)

However, he was ready to admit that there was people within the community who he had heard express racist attitudes but none had been directed at his family:

"I sometimes get little hints of it. People at our church talk rather stupidly, I think, about coloured people. They are not racist but they just inherit a certain kind of turn of phrase which really isn't quite how you want it." (27)

The second family (28) who live in central London, which also had a large ethnic minority community, stated that they could not remember experiencing racism despite expecting to. However, it had not been the white community from which they were expecting the racism but the Black community and possibly including the families of their son's Black friends. They had been unsure about whether they would be accepted as a mixed-race family. The mother did recount one occasion when she was in the local supermarket and a West Indian man was wandering around shouting. She was unsure whether his shouting was addressed at her but at one point she thought he was calling her a tramp and she assumed this was because she was a white woman with a black child but she really was not sure. The family does feel, however, that they have the advantage of living in a multiculturally mixed area unlike friends who have adopted from Sri Lanka and who live in areas where the majority of the population is white. They felt it was more difficult for these families because their black child is the 'odd one out' and more easily noticed, whereas where they lived there were so many nationalities and colours their son fits in very easily. However, as with the family above, they were aware of tensions between ethnic groups. In their area they suggest it was between the Afro-Caribbean and Asians whereas in another suburb it was between the Sikhs and Moslems. They then went on to suggest cultural differences in a similar vein as the family mentioned earlier (14), about mannerisms and behaviour:

"There will be barriers because they [adoptees] look different and I mean it is more than the skin, they actually do look different but also expressions are different. I went to a comedy club, which turned out to have a Black audience. We were the only two whites and most of the jokes were about Blacks against Blacks. They were telling jokes against themselves and about their differences between different islands. Another example, the Sri Lankans are very open in how they speak. I have got a bent arm, in this country no one says anything, in Sri Lanka it's, "What's wrong with your arm?" They come out with very personal things. They are not being rude, it's just them." (28)

9.2.5 Positive comments and stereotyping

Many parents when asked about their experiences of racism were unsure whether they had ever really experienced racism. This was the response when one of the families who had adopted from Sri Lanka was asked about their experiences and the father said that

what he remembers was almost the opposite of racism and what he described as an overt 'gushing' of sentimentality rather than negative comments:

"The reverse may happen where she would be treated as somebody exceptional or special because she is a black little girl. I think, just once or twice we have found ourselves meeting people who meet us for the first time have been far more gushing because they are slightly charmed by this little black girl with two white parents."
(27)

Carrie Howard (1999) an adoptive mother writing in an America adoption magazine talks about her experiences of what she calls 'the China doll' syndrome. This was where parents found that since adopting from China on many occasions they were approached in the street, in supermarkets and restaurants by strangers exclaiming how beautiful their daughter was, how adorable she was and receiving other equally positive comments. Initially they welcomed such comments and were happy to respond positively but as time passed they began to question why their daughter was attracting so many praises and why strangers felt they had to comment. They began to feel that despite these comments being well intentioned they were in reality a form of subtle prejudice. One thing that such comments do is reinforce the 'difference' - the parent's difference from their daughter and their daughter's difference from the majority population both of which Howard feels is easily understood by the children from an early age. She also feels there is a problem in that the children soon pick up on the idea that it is their appearance that is important and other aspects of themselves are not valued to the same extent.

Register (1991) also comments that racism can take seemingly benign forms, which includes the stereotyping of children's abilities based on racial attributes. She gives the example of expectations that children from Asian backgrounds will do well academically based on an awareness that many Asian children are doing well within the education system in the UK or the reverse where children from Afro-Caribbean heritage are not expected to succeed academically. In Humphrey and Humphrey (1993) one of the parents adopting from Brazil suggested that 'genetic imprints' was the reason why his son was good at football, saying:

“Where else would he have got his innate ball skills and passion for football?” (p59)

Like any other prejudice, positive stereotyping can place limitations on a child, taking away his or her right to be perceived as an individual with unique gifts (Howard 1999).

9.3 Responses from People in the Country of Origin

There were several families who commented that they had expected there might be resentment and ill feeling towards them as a family during their stay in the children's birth countries but this had not happened. Seven of the eight families adopting from China commented that one thing that had made them feel at ease with their decision to adopt an infant from China was the reaction of the Chinese people they met when they were over there:

“They [the Chinese people] were very curious when we were walking around with a Chinese baby. People wanted to know – the Chinese are very direct and they would come up and say ‘why Chinese baby?’ We learnt the Chinese word for adoption because it happened such a lot and they couldn’t speak English. Everybody was very, very nice. When people knew that she was coming from the orphanage they were fabulous. All my worries and fears didn’t come to fruition at all.” (05)

However, there was one family (06) who experienced a negative response during their visit to China to adopt their daughter. This was from a food stallholder where they went to buy something to eat. The lady serving was heard to be at cursing them - ‘She cursed. You could tell, you could just tell. She really was’. However, this may not have been a racist curse and the parents felt the incident had been put into perspective because since the adoption they have travelled extensively both in this country and abroad and nothing like it had happened since.

Another family who told about experiences during a return trip was the family returning to Brazil (26). The father spoke about how he had been made to feel uncomfortable holding his son, John, on his knee:

“John is John to me and I’m sort of not that overtly aware that he doesn’t look like me but his skin is a slightly different colour, but to me he is just my son. The only time that I ever became aware of this difference was when we were sitting outside a bar and John came to sit on my knee. But then my wife said to me, ‘you know I think you should become aware while you are here of touching him and being too demonstrative with him because while you were holding him there you were getting some really funny looks from people around you.’ Cos there is big child prostitution racket in Brazil and kids on the street and kids are cheap. Because you don’t look like his father they could think I have just picked up some street kid. It never occurred to me.” (26)

This father was another parent who talked about different cultural values and behaviours of people from different countries. He went on to talk in more detail about the family’s stay in Brazil and spoke about how in Brazil the men do not take very much responsibility for child care. One day they had been visiting friends and were having a bar-b-que one afternoon and all the men were:

“.....sitting around having a few beers and I had John, I was holding him and one of the guys eventually look at me in irritation and said, ‘Here at this time of day it is when the women have the babies, now, the men don’t do this.’ He was really irritated by having this child around. It was something you didn’t do if you were a man, you didn’t hold the baby.” (26)

Experiences in the children’s birth countries appear to have been positive for the majority of parents both on the first visit for the adoption or on any subsequent visits. However, different perceptions and values between the parents and the people in the birth country were highlighted.

9.4 Parents’ Responses to Racism

The majority of the parents seem to have given some thought to the potential for racism and many had convinced themselves that if, and most likely when it happened they would instinctively know how to handle the situation:

"I don't know until it happens. I think it's all to do with the parents not the children. I think if you have got bigoted parents it's a big problem but we just meet it as it comes. I have brought the boys [birth sons] up to be very independent and they can all speak for themselves and I think she [adopted daughter] will be the same really. I am quite confident actually. I have no worries about that, none at all, no." (07)

This may be a reasonable assumption or expectation as long as the children have been provided adequately with a range of methods for handling situations as they arise and with the confidence to manage situations in a way which they feel comfortable with. Crumbley (1999) suggests that children need to learn about circumstances in which racism and prejudices may occur. They should be taught a series of options for dealing with such episodes, which can be in the form of 'selective confrontation' tactics or 'selective avoidance' tactics.

An effective coping strategy against racism is for children to have positive feelings of self-worth and as Tizard and Phoenix (1994) stress it is important for parents to instill pride and self-respect in their children and also a pride in being 'black'. They also add that there is a need to teach children that discrimination is usually projected at the 'black' community as whole rather than being a reflection of any shortcoming they may have as individuals. Children must be aware that racism is not something that they have to deal with alone.

From the accounts in the previous sections of this chapter a number of coping strategies seem to be emerging which could be labelled, passive, semi-passive, confrontational or just 'ignoring' (Scourfield et al 2002). McAdoo (1997) along with many other writers, as outlined in the introduction to part four, believe that Black parents, based on their own experiences with oppression and discrimination are better equipped than white parents to provide their children with the coping strategies they may need for dealing with racism. Parents must be able to perform a delicate balancing act when helping their children learn about racism: they must assist them to learn effective coping strategies without

overwhelming them or overprotecting them. From interviews with ethnic minority children and their families living in an almost entirely white area of South Wales Scourfield et al (2002) found that many parents and children ignored racist comments. This could indicate a sense of powerlessness by ethnic minority populations, or such responses could be interpreted as a pragmatic choice and as a source of strength because it was not 'worth getting worked up about' (p171). Using the work of Scourfield et al (2002) we can compare differences between non-adoptive ethnic minority families (i.e. same race) and the ethnic minority families in this study that have been formed by adoption. Comparisons can be made between the experiences and coping strategies of 'black' families or white families with 'black' children (for example, mixed race families see Park and Song 2000).

One of the families adopting from Sri Lanka (15) felt there was a need to prepare their daughter, despite her still only being aged five years, to stand up for herself in uncomfortable situations:

"Our daughter is quite independent and I have always encouraged that; more independent than other mothers because I think that they could have knocks in life - to be able to stand those knocks. Unfortunately in the last few months she has been a bit weepy at times. If things don't go her way she does get a bit put out and I hope that it is a passing phase and that she does get over it and not get so upset because other kids don't want to play with her or whatever." (15)

The mother did not elaborate as to whether the other children did not want to play with her daughter through racist motives or whether it was simply children being difficult with each other. It does, however, seem that the mother preferred that her daughter learn to cope with these situations rather find out why her daughter has been 'a bit weepy at times'.

One mother who had adopted three girls from Guatemala (31) commented that she was finding it difficult to get the right balance between making her children aware of different types of racist comments and behaviours they may encounter but at the same time not making them anxious about where, when and how this might happen. On the whole she

felt the important thing was to try to teach the children to be self-confident and to 'stand up for themselves'. She also felt that as an adoptive parent she had become more and more aware of how much racism there was around and having herself experienced the extreme behaviour of Neo-Nazi party members¹¹⁵ she now felt slightly more able to help her daughters to be strong. She felt she now fully appreciated the impact of intimidation and feelings of anxiety racism can have on a person and in the future could empathize more easily with racist experiences her three daughter daughters might have.

An additional factor to take into consideration when evaluating differences in experiences and differences in coping strategies is that of individual personalities. This includes both the parents and the children but also the relationship the parents and children have with each other. A good illustration of this comes from the two oldest children in the sample, who had been adopted from Sri Lanka and were aged eighteen and fourteen years at the time of the interview. During the interview the eighteen-year-old girl she gave a good account of what she had experienced and how she had coped with the situations as they arose. Racism seemed to have been something she had encountered periodically throughout her life and when she was younger she found herself less able to cope with such situations but today she was confident she had a repertoire of responses and would not allow herself to be intimidated by racist comments:

"I used to get racism when I was younger. I got called 'nigger, a Paki' and I turned and said, 'I'm not Pakistani so how can I be a Paki?' and they said to me, 'oh yeah, you're all the same, you're Black'. But now they wouldn't because they know better, but back then when they did it, it did hurt. But you can't sink to their level so all you can do is turn round." (21)

When asked, by her mother who was present during the interview, whether it still happened today she said it did but:

"I tell them it's not funny and they should know better basically and they just look at me and they say, 'oh sorry'." (21)

¹¹⁵ Threats serious enough for police involvement.

The fourteen-year-old younger brother went on to tell about his experience during a train journey with some friends:

"There was a bunch of drunks and they were just 'giving it all the lip'. There was me and another boy who was sort of Chinese, half Chinese, half black. There was about eight of us all together [the others being white]. Then these boys, they weren't boys they were men.... You could see, you could smell their breath, the alcohol across the carriage and they were saying, 'go home, you don't deserve to live', stuff like that." (21)

The way they managed this situation was to ignore the drunken name-callers and he said he felt reasonably safe because he was with a group of his friends. However, the boy and his friends did eventually get up and leave the carriage but what the incident had made him realise was how uncertain he was about how he should have reacted or what he should have done in such a situation. It was apparent that this was the first time the parents had heard about this experience and they were quite concerned that he had not told them earlier but were also concerned that he had found himself in that a situation. The parent's surprise about hearing this story from their son suggests that as a family they had not experienced such overt racism previously. However they were pleased that he had coped and that he had the support of an immediate group of friends.

It could be expected that if the parents of the adopted children were themselves from an ethnic minority group they would have a greater appreciation of how their children would feel and be able to offer support and ideas about how to handle racist situations. In this sample group there was only one parent who belonged to an ethnic minority group whose appearance was different to the majority population, and this was a father who had adopted from Sri Lanka (10) and was Chinese. He pointed out how much the situation for ethnic minorities had changed since he came to the UK as a child in the 1930s and how as a child his family had been the only Chinese family living in their area, whereas now he and his family lived in an area with several different ethnic minorities. He had tried to explain to his children how much better their situation was today than it had been for him when he was a child:

"I said to the children, 'you know you think you look different but really there are lots of other children like yourself.' I explained to them that when I went to school there were no Chinese children at all in the class. There was only me. So in a sense I felt isolated. And there was a lot more racial prejudice." (10)

This explanation given by the father does not suggest he would be more supportive to his children because of his experiences and that he feels it was worse for him and racism today is not as serious as it was when he was a child. Also, it cannot be assumed that if the children experience racism it will help them to feel better about the incident, or to manage the situation because their father's experience in the past had been worse than theirs. It is difficult for children to be this reflective and it does not always help knowing things could be worse.

One family who had adopted two boys from Sri Lanka (14) felt that they themselves had become sensitive to, and were quick to notice negative attitudes in others. They were unsure, however, whether this was a good or a bad thing because, as they went on to illustrate, there were times when they thought they overreacted to situations before realising they had mis-interpreted the actions of others and seen them as threatening when they were not. They went on to say that they had not experienced any overt hostility but the mother had once found herself in a situation where she had felt threatened (physically) by a man approaching her:

"I was walking the buggy on the common and this great bull-necked man, cropped hair, and tattoos comes lumbering over. He was making for me and I thought, 'how do I get away? How do I get a buggy past him?' And he came straight up to me and said, 'God bless you missus, they are beautiful.'" (14)

She was hugely relieved but felt an element of shame that she had expected the worst from the man because of his appearance and it was a salutary lesson for her, acknowledging that it was her own stereotyping which had made her afraid.

9.5 Who Children turn to for Support

Interviewing parents about their children's experiences of racism may not give a full picture into children's experiences but it will give an insight into the parents' perceptions of the seriousness of the problem and how they as a family manage racist incidences. There is concern that children do not always tell their parents about their experiences of racism, as in one or two of the examples earlier in this chapter.

Children know their parents will be hurt if they tell them they are being teased because of their race (colour) or ethnic background, so they do not always tell them (Botvar 1994). Scourfield et al (2002) found there were several reasons why children did not tell their parents about racist experiences but mostly it was because they did not want to spread distress throughout the family. There was the feeling amongst the children that the parents could do little to resolve the problem and in some cases blamed the children by asking, 'what were you doing there anyway' (p170).

One father said that he would probably not be the person to whom his daughter would turn to if she was experiencing problems and he doubted whether children always discussed with their parents concerns they may have:

" she's forthcoming to us in some things but who knows what she sometimes reflects on that she hasn't told us." (27)

Another family who had adopted from Sri Lanka (28) had become aware that their son did not always confide in them about issues which were concerning him. They remembered one occasion when their son had suffered racial abuse, which they only heard about afterwards. It happened at school when children had been calling their son names. However, the school had been aware of the incident and had taken immediate action and the parents of the instigator of the racist taunts had been called into the school to discuss what had happened. When this story was being told during the interview the parents seemed unsure about the details of what had actually happened but were quite

happy with the school's handling of the situation. They admit their son is quite reticent and does not 'open up' to them a great deal and that he had not complained about this incidence of racial abuse.

9.5.1 Support given in schools to tackle racism

The response to racism by the schools was found to be as varied as the responses amongst the parents. This is similar to the findings of Scourfield et al (2002) where there were a numbers of schools who were prepared to intervene when racist incidents occurred but others who did not respond at all. They also found that none of the children felt supported or confident that their school would be there to help them if they had problems with racism.

One family (05) was particularly concerned about which school their daughter would attend and very much wanted to find a school which had specific policies on racism and had strategies about how they would handle the situation if or when racism arises. What they found was that the local state school's response, when asked, was that all the teachers had been on courses about racism and bullying, but the school did not have a written policy and seemed unsure how they would actually deal with such situations. This influenced the adoptive parents' decision and they chose a school that had both a multicultural approach to education as well as specific policies and strategies about how to handle racism if it occurred. The school was a fee-paying school and had a number of children from different ethnic backgrounds. The parents were fully aware that having policies and strategies for handling such situations does not mean their daughter will not come up against racism:

"I am not saying it won't happen there but at least they have got in-situ ways to deal with it. They are teaching children from an early age about different ethnic origins. About different religions. About different groups." (05)

It is this multicultural approach that is seen as a positive move towards reducing prejudices. The parents in this school who were of different nationalities were invited to get involved in classroom activities based around multicultural education, which was wide ranging and involved learning about religions of the world, festivities, different food, and traditional costumes:

“Although she might be in the minority there, I don’t think she will feel quite so isolated because they are teaching them about all sorts of nationalities.” (05)

Scourfield et al (2002) found that the small number of the children in their sample who went to fee-paying schools had less to say about racism than did the children attending the almost entirely white state school in the locality of their research.

9.6 Summary and Discussion

This chapter is about the parents’ perception of racism and their family’s experiences of racism. It is therefore based on responses from mainly white adults about experiences of racist attitudes towards ‘mixed’ race families and on their interpretation of what their children felt about such experiences. The views of parents may not fully coincide with the actual facts because they can only discuss what they have experienced themselves or what they have been told by their children. There were parents who told about how they had ‘found out’ about their children’s experiences of racism rather than the children having told them. Most parents did not seem overly concerned about racism at the present time and did not report any major incidences. However, many did suggest that when their children were older and particularly when they went to High School they would be more likely to encounter problems involving racism. What was less clear was how they were going to prepare their children to manage such situations if or when they happened in the future. Parents did talk about teaching their children to ‘stand up for themselves’ if other children called them names and teased or bullied them about their colour. In most cases this did not usually go beyond telling them to correct the ‘name-caller’ if for example they called them a ‘Paki’ when they were not from Pakistan.

The majority of the children were under the age of ten years¹¹⁶ and it might have hoped they would not have experienced any racism. However, racist attitudes and behaviours can emanate from children as young as two years of age and there were examples where the adoptees had been the target of racist comments coming from children as young as this. The most common type of racism was 'name-calling' by other children and the parent's response was to 'play down' the incidents not want to be confrontational by either challenging the children's behaviour, contacting the parents or asking the school to intervene on their behalf. Parents preferred to explain to the 'name-caller' that such behaviour was offensive and unnecessarily hurtful.

There were also examples where complete strangers felt it was acceptable to make comments about and ask questions about the adopted children. This was happening most when the families first came home to the UK and the adoptees were babies or toddlers. Many such comments were positive and good-natured but two issues can be raised about this type of incident. The first is about what this tells the children who are continually questioned about their origins and the differences between them and their parents? Secondly, racial stereotyping, whether positive or not, does not allow the child to be seen or to feel they are valued as individuals.

Children living in neighbourhoods in which there are few, if any ethnic minorities will be more reliant upon their parents to support and guide them about how to handle discrimination and prejudice (racism). Living in a small community in which the mixed race adoptive family were in the minority or were possibly the only family who had a 'black' member was felt by some parents to be advantageous because the children, or the family, were not seen as a threat and were accepted as individuals. However, this

¹¹⁶ Thirty-one of the forty-three children were under age ten years. See Appendix D: for further details about the age of children at the time of adoption and year of adoption.

contrasts with the findings of Botvar (1994) where more than fifty percent of Norwegian adoptees in his study and who were part of a small ethnic minority population, had experienced race related teasing or bullying. Therefore, being a 'nominal white' does not guarantee acceptance by the community and could make the child the focus for discriminatory behaviour, as was the case for one of the adoptees in von Melen's (1998) account of experiences of intercountry adoptees living in Sweden. Yet it seems that the presence of other ethnic minorities does not protect children and their families from the experience of racism. There were cases where the racist comments had come from children belonging to white ethnic minority groups or where tensions existed between black ethnic minority groups.

Overall the parents appeared unprepared about how they were going to handle any major acts of racism directed at them or their children and felt that when the time came they would automatically know what would be the best way to respond. However, is it possible that parents can ever be fully prepared for this eventuality? Talking on Radio 4¹¹⁷, Pat Wordley, the ex-chairperson of the Association for Families who have Adopted from Abroad (AFAA) spoke about how she felt when her daughter came to her distressed about name-calling at school. Despite thinking she was well prepared and expecting to be able to respond in a rational and considered way she was amazed at the irrationality of her feelings towards the perpetrators of the racist comments.

Hayes (1993) suggests that evidence of structural or institutional racism e.g. the MacPherson Report (1999) does not adequately differentiate between the experiences of different ethnic groups, nor does it elaborate on how institutional racism impacts at a personal/individual level. The role of stereotyping and the darkness of a person's skin impacts on how others perceive them and behave towards them. From the experiences of the small number of parents in this sample who have adopted from China, it does appear

¹¹⁷ Between Ourselves, 2 September 2003

that female Chinese adoptees will experience less negative racism than darker-skinned children and may experience more 'positive racism' than other children.

Many families in this study were not labelling certain behaviours as racist behaviours and there were occasions when their children were being called names that parents preferred to think of this as teasing or even bullying. They acknowledged the behaviours were unacceptable but did not always see them in racist terms.

A methodological note of caution needs to be made about the matter of a white researcher talking to white adopters about the experiences of their 'black' children. Park and Green (2000) suggest that what is needed is more research about the outcomes of adoptions by white families of ethnic minority children. Kirton (2000a) also suggests that to see children's experiences through the eyes of white parents is not giving a clear picture or understanding of the children's experiences. Therefore, further research is needed with children who have been adopted from overseas to gain a better understanding of their feelings and their experiences of racism.

There are a number of problems when making recommendations to parents or policy makers based on research findings from other countries. Literature from the USA is far more concerned about the needs of all ethnic minority groups and the importance of being prepared for encounters of racism. In contrast, literature from Scandinavia where racism is seen as less of a problem there is more interest in supporting intercountry adoptees to become fully integrated into Scandinavian society. Saetersdal and Dalen (2000) comment about the 'intense political discussions' in the UK and the USA about transracial and intercountry adoption, which have been more or less absent in Norway. This, they suggest, is because, historically, Norway has been ethnically homogeneous and not affected by immigration to the same extent as either the UK or the USA and therefore finds it hard to understand the 'passionate debates' about issues of race (p166). Structural, political and historical differences between countries will influence the

appropriateness of policy recommendations and political ideology will influence policy discussions. The USA has a history of slavery and the population is more multicultural than either the UK or the Scandinavian countries and this will impact peoples' perceptions and experiences of living in a multicultural society and of racism.

If it is accepted that it is the responsibility of parents to prepare their children about what they may encounter in respect of prejudice and discrimination in society, schools must also have a role in influencing the social attitudes and behaviour of young people. However, the wider community also has a responsibility towards young people who belong to ethnic minority populations. After talking with the parents it was clear that they all hoped their children would grow in confidence about their ethnic identity and would eventually be like the children in the research of Scourfield et al (2002),

‘.....resourceful and resilient strategists who negotiated the daily challenges of playground, park and neighbourhood with a degree of confidence’ (p168)

Introduction to Part Five

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The aim of this final part of the thesis is to review the key findings from the research and link these to a consideration of how to improve policy and practice in relation to intercountry adoption in the UK. The parents interviewed had adopted over a long period - from the mid 1980s to 1999 - and experiences will have been influenced by the time period in which they adopted and the length of time the children have been living with them. The section begins by examining different types of support available to adoptive parents (chapter ten) and where parents turn for this support. The final chapter will look at other key issues in the research and review recent developments in adoption related legislation. Some of the issues raised throughout the thesis are already being addressed by new legislation in the *Adoption Intercountry Aspects Act 1999* and the *2002 Adoption and Children Act*.

Support

The role of social support is important to everyone to some degree at different times in their lives and is particularly important during times of life transitions, which require reorientations and re-arrangements of social networks. A major source of support at such times is likely to be from others who are experiencing similar changes because it is amongst people with similar experiences that you feel most comfortable and can get advice, guidance and support (practical and emotional). As part of her editorial review of 'social support and HIV' Green (1993) notes that there are theoretical problems when looking at certain aspects of social support because there can be major socio-economic and cultural variations with support structures varying according to a whole series of characteristics including gender, social class and race. She does, however, go on to show a positive association between social support and psychological health citing research

findings of Turner (1981,1983), Procidano and Helloer (1983), Sarason et al, (1983) Sandler and Barrera (1984) Cohen and Wills (1985); each of which support this premise. Psychological wellbeing has to be an essential part of family stability and will have a positive contribution to the parenting abilities for all parents including those having adopted children from overseas.

Parent support groups

In part four of this study there was a look at ways in which parents helped their children to incorporate aspects of their birth culture into their everyday lives via various means. In addition to methods identified in chapter eight, Carstens and Julia (2000) identify membership of parent support groups as a major factor influencing parents about the need to incorporate into their lives aspects of their child's ethnic origins. Kirton (2000a) agrees that being a member of an adoption support group helps parents in 'managing difference', with an added benefit of helping children to learn about their cultural origins if the group is 'country specific'. When families meet with other families who have adopted children from overseas this can also help to alleviate feelings of isolation especially for families who do not live in neighbourhoods with few, if any other mixed race families or ethnic populations. Kirton (2000a), however, goes on to suggest that the benefits of group membership are not that great in comparison to the advantages of living in neighbourhoods where there are multicultural communities.

Crandles et al, (1992) suggest that support groups benefit their membership because members feel their situation is understood and accepted in ways it could not be understood by people outside of the group. Group membership not only provides different types of support, but also provides a sense of belonging, which comes from recognition of similarities with other members. For members of intercountry adoption families there are many aspects of their family composition and paths to parenthood which are different from the majority. The group is a place where families can give as well as receive support; where members are accepted in ways that they may not be elsewhere and it is a place where they do not need to explain their situation. Membership of a parent support group can help reduce feelings of isolation and help create a social

support network free of stigma. Additional benefits include having someone to confide in about worries or concerns you may be having and it may be easier to express concerns, fears and insecurities about the adoption to others who have had similar experiences. Yet the paradox is that by becoming a member of a parent support group you are acknowledging 'difference' by seeking out similar others. Membership also provides role models for adoptive parenthood and, children become companions and role models for each other. They are with children with a similar heritage but also children who may have a number of similar issues to be faced in their everyday lives.

Services to adoptive parents

For families who have adopted domestically the first port of call if they are experiencing difficulties is most likely to be the agency that arranged the placement but for families who adopt from overseas this may not be the case. In the case of intercountry adoptions the situation is different because for the earliest adoptions there will have been no adoption agency involvement. For the more recent adoptions a local authority or voluntary adoption agency will have done the Home Study Assessment but they will have not been involved in the actual child placement element.

Despite a growing interest in post-adoption support for adoptive parents, services vary considerably with those provided by the voluntary adoption agencies having a reputation for being more proactive (Rushton and Dance 2002). These agencies are more likely to keep in touch with families after the adoption order has been granted and many organize regular social events

The types of services available to adoptive families have, over the years, have been developed as a response to research findings and Rushton and Dance (2002) suggest a typology of services according to a progression from preventive, through more problem-focused approaches, to individual therapeutic services (p31). The preventive services include many of those discussed in chapter 10 – including helplines, information giving, financial payments, support groups, mentoring with other adopters and newsletters. The

more problem-focused range of services includes direct work with parents via parenting skills training, advice and guidance and support groups for adopted children.

Despite the increases in services and support available to adoptive parents there has been little attention to the specific needs of families adopting from overseas (Selman and Wells 1996). Another issue that needs to be examined is whether intercountry adoptive parents will feel they have a right to services and whether they would be prepared to admit that they need help. With this in mind there will be an exploration of the potential role of specialist agencies particularly in the area of mediation. The chapter will also consider whether overseas adopters are likely to benefit from the improved support services under the 2002 Act, which have been largely developed in relation to the planned expansion of adoption of looked after children and especially those with special needs.

Other Key Issues

The research has also raised a number of issues involving the whole process of adoption; home studies; preparation classes; access to information; the implications of adopting from overseas for the parents in terms of their family identity and their perceptions of the needs of their children in respect of identity and links to birth country. Clearly some of these will link to the support needs raised in chapter ten.

Finally the thesis will end with a consideration of likely future developments affecting those adopting from overseas in UK and note the limitations of this research and need for further studies on particular issues. Where possible concerns and recommendations will be linked to the research findings outlined in the previous six chapters, but it must be stressed that the situation today inevitably is different from the context experienced by the families interviewed.

Chapter 10: Sources of Support for Families Adopting from Overseas

10.1 Introduction

This chapter will look at the support overseas adoptive parents have available to them both during the adoption process and after the completion of the adoption and the children come to live with them in the UK. This will include a look at whether family members supported the adoptive parents in their decision to adopt from overseas; an examination of the role of parents support groups during both pre and post adoption stages, and a look at agency provision of adoption support services. Finally there will be a consideration about whether there is a need for specialist intercountry adoption agencies.

When discussing what we mean by support it is often useful to conceptualise it into separate elements such as emotional support, information, companionship and practical support. These constituent parts of support will be drawn upon when looking at the families' experiences of overseas adoption and examining ways in which their experiences may have been enhanced if there had been additional types of support available to them. However, in many situations these different elements of support are inter-related and it may be too simplistic to separate them out in this way (O'Neil 2003). For example there may be occasions when support may be purely practical in essence but is experienced by the recipient as emotionally supportive. Therefore, support is complex and has to be seen as consisting of a 'dynamic set of interactions' (O'Neil 2003 p21) which not only changes over time but from one situation to another. Therefore, there may be occasions during this chapter when the term 'support' is used when a number of the core elements of support are being discussed.

Access to social support is important, especially during times of uncertainty, an argument which seems particularly pertinent when examining the experiences of families adopting from overseas (Triseliotis 2000). Where people get their support and the types of services families want varies and can include a wide range of social networks provided by family, friends and neighbours or parent support groups. In addition Local Authority Social Services Departments, registered voluntary adoption agencies or voluntary post adoption services all offer services to adoptive parents.

At the time that the families in this sample were adopting their children there was even less knowledge and understanding about adopting a child from another country. Procedures were even less clear than they are today with fewer agencies available to turn to for advice and guidance. As mentioned in chapter four many parents were concerned about whether they were doing something illegal because they were uncertain about following correct procedures especially in the country from which they were adopting. As will be seen later in the chapter it was during the early stages of the adoption that the majority of parents in this sample group sought the support of other adopters via membership of adoptive parent support groups. Parents who have had little contact with or support from statutory services at the time of the adoption may be reluctant approach such agencies for post-adoption support or may not have been aware that there are services available. This chapter will have a look at the types of support this sample group of adoptive parents have received and ways in which services could possibly be improved.

10.2 Family Members' Support for the Adoption

Gaining the support of ones own family (about the adoption) is important if the adoptive parents are to feel a sense of acceptance because the fear of judgement and rejection would be particularly difficult if it came from one's own family. However, because of the considerable uncertainty connected with adoption, especially overseas adoption, many prospective adopters felt inhibited during the early stages of the adoption about

sharing plans with friends and with members of their family. Thus, families were unable to rally around and give the emotional support to adopters during the early stages of the adoption process because they were unaware of the adopters' intentions. Reasons for not telling family members differed. One family adopting from Sri Lanka (14) explained that they did not tell anyone in the beginning because they were not sure whether their application would be successful but there was also an element of superstition involved with a feeling that if everyone knew their plans, things were bound to go wrong. However, once families were told by the prospective adopters about their intention to adopt from overseas it appears there was a range of reactions.

10.2.1 Reactions from grandparents about the adoption

The family members most adopters spoke about were their own parents, the grandparent of their adoptive children. In the family mentioned above (14) it was the mother who was her self adopted so there was not a problem with the idea of adoption but the husbands' parents were a little less receptive and it was suggested that part of the reason for this was because blood ties were important to them. However, as was found with many other adopters once the children joined the family they were treated as members of the family:

"She now treats them entirely as her grandchildren but I think she has a very strong sense of blood ties and these things seem to be extremely important to her."
(14)

Similar findings by Kirk (1984) showed that although the large majority of adopters' parents approved of the adoption, there were those who were less than enthusiastic and there were a small minority who were disapproving. However, as in the above example, there was an almost complete swing to approval once the child had become part of the adoptive household. This absolute 'winning over' of grandparents was a situation found by the majority of families where there had been initial doubts.

Negative reactions of grandparents

One family commented that in their family the grandparent's continued to have a lack of enthusiasm about the parents adopting from overseas:

"His mother [paternal grandmother] was against it really and kept saying, 'I thought you would forget about it.' [She] hoped we would forget about it. But of course we didn't." (10)

Unlike other families, and the research findings from Kirk, this family continued to be unsure about whether the grandparent actually ever fully accepted their adopted children. It was suggested that a solid relationship never developed between the grandparents and the grandchildren with, for example, no babysitting or special treats being offered or being given to the adopted children. However, the parents did go on to explain that by the time the adoption had gone through the grandmother was quite elderly and it may have been unrealistic to expect her to have been enthusiastic about taking on a caring role for her grandchildren.

These were not the only family where the grandparents were less than wholehearted but what seemed apparent was that there appeared to be no resentment from the adopters, instead they offered a range of explanations about the unenthusiastic reactions from their parents. These included disappointment at not continuing the bloodline of the family (as with the family above), and the fact they already had a number of grandchildren and therefore, another grandchild was not a novelty:

"My father was disappointed about us not having our own children and carrying on the line. Whereas your mother [paternal grandmother] just had not been enthusiastic about having more grandchildren. She was the eldest of a large family so had all those children, then she had her own children and then she had a batch of grandchild and then ours came along and it was like, 'oh god I'm too old'." (25)

The grandparents are often in their seventies or eighties, because the parents themselves are older than average parents (generally in their forties with some in their fifties), which may mean they were set in their ways and found it difficult to adapt to new situations. However, there was one family who suggested there was an element of racism in the

attitudes of at least one of their parents and that possibly they were concerned about themselves becoming part of a mixed-race family¹¹⁸:

"The only negative reaction we had was by my parents who are in their early seventies and I think they had preconceived ideas about adoption and about adoption from abroad. So they weren't happy at all."(05)

The family found that racist comments, which the grandparents had previously made and had in the past been ignored, were now more difficult to tolerate, and they felt such comments to be unnecessarily hurtful. However, as with all the other grandparents who were less than enthusiastic, once they met the child they were 'marvellous' despite the continued occasional racist comment. The racist comments were still being made but it seemed that the parents were prepared to tolerate behaviour from their own parents that they would otherwise have found unacceptable:

"You still get the racist comments about every other race. As long as she doesn't say it in front of our daughter that's fine. Because, I mean, they are an older generation and a different generation. I don't like it but you can't deal with it. They live a distance away so I don't have to deal with it on a day to day basis."(05)

Positive reactions of grandparents

One family, who was expecting a negative response from one of the grandmothers for racist reasons, was pleasantly surprised when she responded positively. They explained why they had been concerned:

"I was a bit worried about my mum because, she is not overtly racist at all but there has been a lot of racial unrest in New Zealand. A lot of protests and that sort of thing so a lot of the older generation have hardened, divided, become a lot more separated than when I was young. So she has been affected by that but she was fine and she absolutely adores them both. She was actually quite proud of the fact they were from Guatemala. So, ... we have had good attitudes from everybody." (15)

¹¹⁸ See Chapter 9 for further discussion about families' experiences of racism.

In contrast to the less than enthusiastic reactions of some of the elderly parents there were families who got very enthusiastic reactions. One family (06) commented that the adoption had 'given them [grandparents] the lift they needed' and another family (28) told of the reaction of one of their parents as being 'hurray, I'm going to be a granddad'. Also, the family adopting from Chile (19) felt that both sets of grandparents had been delighted from the beginning and it had not taken until the child arrived back into the UK to be won over by the idea. The mother suggested it might have been because both the adopting mother and father had lived abroad for a number of years which then made the idea of a child from overseas joining the family not that surprising.

10.2.2 Mixed reactions from other family members

A range of reactions from different members of the family was experienced by one of the families adopting from Sri Lanka (22). They had not found it difficult to tell their family about their intentions to adopt because other family members had adopted previously. However, they were surprised by the reaction of a cousin who for an unexplained reason, they had expected to be negative about the adoption, but in fact responded in a very positive way and subsequently one of the adoptive daughters was named after this cousin. The unexpected negative response came from one of the adoptive mother's sisters who criticised their decision to adopt from overseas. The explanation given for this was that this was the sister who had herself adopted children and possibly she felt she was 'the adopter' in the family. A response of a different kind came in the form of positive discrimination from an aunt who would send money for all three children but the two adopted children would get more than the biological son would.

Birth children

For families with biological children who have to be told that their parents intend to adopt other children from overseas it can be a worrying time. However, for this family (22) when their biological son was told, at about the age of seven years, that his parents were thinking about adopting two girls from overseas he was quite happy with the idea of

adoption but horrified that they were both going to be girls. This reaction has not had any adverse impact on their developing relationship because by the time the adoption took place he had come to terms with it and became very fond of his two new sisters.

Two other families (02, 09), who had birth children prior to the adoption from overseas, commented that they found telling of their intention to adopt from overseas unproblematic. In these two cases it was suggested this was because both sets of birth children, at the time of the adoption, were grown up and living their own lives away from the family home. One of the family's (09) was also the family who were embarking on a second adoption from China which was openly discussed during the interview with the adopted child present. It was apparent the topic was discussed regularly when the child was present and a name had been chosen for the new infant with arrangements for the proposed visit to collect the child from China openly discussed.

Summary

It does therefore seem that families cannot be sure what reactions they will receive about their intentions to adopt from overseas. In some cases where negative reactions were expected they did not materialise and at other times less than positive responses were experienced when they were not expected. Generally it was the older relatives who were the least enthusiastic about the proposed adoption but were, in most cases 'won over' once the children came to live with the family. It was also clear that the adoptive parents were able to accept this lack of enthusiasm and a variety of explanations were given as to why the older relatives found it difficult to be as happy as they were at the prospect of adopting a child from overseas.

There will be times when families may not be the only support that adopters feel they need so that they turn elsewhere for support. The following sections will examine a number of alternative sources of support.

10.3 Parent Support Groups

This section will begin with an examination of the role parent support groups and ways in which they are able to support parents during the pre-adoption stages and after the adoption has been completed. The range and type of support offered by parent groups is wide ranging and includes support in the form of comprehensive information about procedures for adopting from overseas. As systems in each country differ it is important for parents to get accurate information about the procedures and adoption criteria in the country of their choice and often parents who have just completed an adoption from a certain country will share their experiences with the group. In some cases the update of information may be at the level of good hotels to stay in and places to visit but can also include more important information such as the troubles with the lawyer in Sri Lanka that many families from the UK were using (see chapter four). Seminars presented by different groups generally deal with post adoption issues that many parents encounter. Most groups publish regular newsletters and many organise seminars and social events to which all members are invited and encouraged to attend. These newsletters can vary in type from those that are mainly individual adoption stories from families to those that have a more educational purpose and publish reports of research findings and other articles covering a wide range of topics about intercountry adoption. These benefits of parent group membership are of a practical type but there are additional emotional benefits of group membership. Examples of these include the acknowledgement and empathy members share with each other about their route to parenthood and, if the group is a country-specific group, the choice of country from which to adopt. Any sense of isolation parents, and their children, may feel can be alleviated by becoming a member of a support group.

All parents in the sample had at some time been a member of a parent support group and some families had been or continued to be a member of more than one group (Table 10.3.1)

Table 10.3.1: Family Membership of Support Groups

Support Group	Totals*
Association of Families who have Adopted Abroad (AFAA)	14
Overseas Adopters Support and Information Services (OASIS)	9
Adopted Romanian Children (ARC)	4
Children Adopted from China (CACH)	5
Sri Lanka Adopters Group	3
The Guatemalan Families Association (GFA)	3
Peru Adoptive Families	1
Network for Intercountry Adoption (NICA)	1
‘Gladney’ Adoptive Families**	1

* Some families are members of more than one group

** Families who have adopted from the USA using the Gladney Center for Adoption

AFAA (pre 1994 known as STORK) was the group with the greatest number of members within this sample with just over forty five percent of families having been a member. However, for some families as time had passed so had their enthusiasm or their need for the group but others continued with their membership and were members of more than one group – often AFAA (STORK) and a country-specific group. These families had over the years attended meetings and social activities organised by the group and their involvement and commitment continued to be as strong as it had been when they first joined the group. Membership of AFAA (STORK) may be higher in this study group because it was the only group at the time that most of the earlier adoptions were taking place, whereas membership of OASIS was the first choice for those who had adopted most recently, particularly those adopting from China.

The number of groups available to parents in the UK has grown in recent years as intercountry adoption has become more popular since the Romanian media revelations in 1991 and the rush to ‘rescue’ these children. Today there are national groups which provide pre-adoption and post-adoption support to families adopting from a number of different countries, regional sub-groups of these organizations and then there are groups

whose members have all adopted from the same country – again some of these have regional sub-groups. Two of the largest groups are AFAA and OASIS and it has been to these that many adoptive families have turned to for support during the early stages.

Not all parents who adopt from overseas become members of parent support groups but Beckett et al (1999) found that eighty two percent of the Romanian adopters in their study had at some time been in contact with other families who had adopted from Romania. This is not quite the same as becoming a member of an organised group but does suggest that the support of other people with similar experiences is seen as beneficial. Despite many advantages of being a member of an organized group it is possible that many families never join such groups or their membership may be time-limited because the parents or children decide to discontinue their association with the group. However, all families in this study had, at some time, been a member of one of the parents support groups (see Table 10.3.1)¹¹⁹ although, as will be seen later in this section, there is a difference between being a member of a group and active involvement with the group.

As highlighted in chapter four, during the early stages of adoption from overseas, the main source of information and support for families in this study had been from other overseas adopters as individuals or from organised parent support groups. The benefits of being a member of a support group during the pre-adoption stage was very much appreciated:

“It was very useful because we were all going through various difficulties and it was nice to now there was somebody in the same situation as you. It was just such a relief to know that you were not the only one.” (21)

¹¹⁹ The nature of the sample, with the main recruitment being from parent support group address lists, has influenced the numbers of families who are members.

10.3.1 Levels of involvement in parent support groups

It was apparent during the interviews that levels of involvement in support groups differed greatly with some families continuing to play an active role in the groups but others having little or no involvement once they had obtained the information they needed to facilitate the adoption. An example of a family who had continued involvement was one of the families adopting from Sri Lankan (22). Both parents were active members of AFAA and the Sri Lankan Adopters Group and the mother had been a speaker at one of AFAA seminars. She had also written a leaflet about racism for distribution amongst the membership of AFAA and the family were a crucial part of the Sri Lankan Adopters Group organisation. In contrast, another of the families adopting from Sri Lanka had only been a member of AFAA at the beginning of their adoption process but had since let their membership lapse. There was a combination of reasons why they had discontinued membership and why they had not felt a need for support from other adopters:

"We were a member just vaguely to start with but we are not good 'joiners' I'm afraid. Just very busy and I know there are all these networks and so on. They are a good idea but we haven't joined any." (27)

Therefore, it may have as much to do with individual personalities and family commitments as with group dynamics. However, a major problem for some families when it comes to attending group meetings was the cost and time involved in travelling to the venue. There is an issue about the location of most of the groups with all the groups originating in the South of England. It does appear from address lists available to members of these groups that the majority of overseas adopters who have joined a group live in the South of England. This causes problems for adopters living in other areas of the UK who may wish to be active members of the group and to attend the organised functions. Some families have started regional sub-groups of the larger groups to try to encourage more families living in northern parts of the UK to become members or to become active members. However, having attended a regional seminar in Leeds organised by AFAA, very few local adoptive families attended and the biggest percentage of the audience being people who had travelled from the south. There can

only be speculation as to why this was the case but it may be that there are actually very few adopters living in the north of England.

At least two families (14, 16) commented that the distance needed to travel to meetings was the main reason they had not attended the group meetings or social events recently. For one of these families (16) the cost in both time and money attending the meetings was not the only reason for non-attendance. They felt that when they did attend they had little in common with the parents other than the fact that they had all adopted children from overseas and, for them this was not enough. However, they were not dismissive of the benefits gained from being a member of the group because friendships had developed at a personal level with one or two of the families and they continued to meet these families socially. The families with whom the friendships had developed were those that they felt had things in common other than the overseas adoption.

The family who adopted from El Salvador (11) reinforced the idea that long-term friendships can develop with members of the group. Despite not continuing as active members of the El Salvador group they had made friends with other adoptive families and these had continued, over the years, as firm friends. The mother explains:

"We used to meet up twice a year and have big 'Beanos' but as they [the children] get older they are not as interested in that. I didn't know many people but I made friends with people and my daughter is still friendly with some of the children. There are about four or five families who live in London who I would have chosen as friends anyway and we see them often. One of these friends has a son who Alice [adopted daughter] is very friendly with and another friend has two children." (11)

However, it was not always the case that either time or distance discouraged involvement in group activities and there were examples of families travelling quite long distances to attend meetings and to meet other adopters. One family living in the South of England (21) had supported families from both Scotland and the North East of England, who coincidentally is one of the families in this research (02). Having just returned from

adopting their two boys they heard about a group get-together (Sri Lankan Adopters Group) and decided to go along and it was here that they met the family from Newcastle:

"We felt we ought to go along and with one child in each carry cot off we went to Basingstoke. We were asked to stand up and talk about our experiences of adoption for the people there who wanted to adopt but haven't gone through the process yet. I stood up and basically said, 'look we couldn't have managed something expensive because lots of people adopted from the United States and so on. I think it was partly that but also the fact that we had these two beautiful babies who were only two months old by that stage but we ended up with a crowd of people around us and some decided they wanted that for themselves.'" (21)

Country-specific parent support groups

The development of the recently formed (1998) Children Adopted from China group in the North East of England is typical of the development of many of the parents support groups. There were a small number of families living in the North East of England, six of whom were interviewed for the current research, and who were all members of OASIS. They had each been put into contact with each other via the OASIS 'buddying' scheme and each of the families had found the personal contact, emotional support and guidance invaluable during the early stages of the adoption process. The families made the decision to continue to meet on a regular basis and an informal support network of friends was formed. The aim was to continue supporting each other but also to offer similar support to future adopters who would get the benefit, not only from their pre-adoption but also their post adoption experiences. Calling themselves the Children Adopted from China (North East) is a little ambiguous because at least one member had not adopted from China but was a regular attendee at their meetings and contributor to the group. It would be interesting to follow the development of this group to see whether their focus becomes centred around Chinese adoptions or whether they widen their remit and become more generalised offering advice and support to adopters from a range of different countries.

One group, the Guatemalan Families Association (GFA) ¹²⁰ is more specifically a country-specific group and has members who live in all parts of the country unlike the example given above. This group will be used as a short case study to illustrate the range of benefits parent groups offer adopters and the types of issues such groups sometimes have to address.

Guatemalan Families Association (GFA)

The main objective of the group is to support internationally adopted Guatemalan children, now living in Britain. They try to help children and their families to actively keep a connection with and understanding of their roots and Guatemalan culture that they consider to be their birthright. The secondary purpose of the group is to support the families and the children by organising up to five national events per year, with additional regional social events, which all the membership are invited. It is hoped that through such gatherings the children get to know each other and build friendships and support networks of their own. In addition they publish a newsletter three times a year, which aims to educate and inform its readership about Guatemala, the country and its culture. Also, included in the newsletter is information about a range of adoption issues and news about recently adopted children.

Bad publicity about adoptions from Guatemala

Adoptions from Guatemala have, over recent years, had some very bad press relating to the legality of the adoptions¹²¹. Doubts have been raised about whether the children were freely relinquished for adoption or whether the birth mothers were coerced into giving up their babies up for adoption. One particularly damaging example of bad publicity was an episode of the Cook Report (1996)¹²² which followed a couple who were posing as prospective adopters and uncovered the unscrupulous/illegal practices of a

¹²⁰ Chairperson and founder member of this group is family 31 in the current study.

¹²¹ ISS Bulletin 18 June 1999; UN Commission for Human Rights 27 January 2000 (ISS Bulletin 26); The Observer 2001; The Guardian 1999.

¹²² Baby Bandits 2: Guatemala - Channel 4 shown on 14th May 1996.

lawyer working in Guatemala. This couple had been in contact with members of GFA and this added to a sense of betrayal and a need to defend themselves against 'infiltrators'. This type of media representation put pressure on the families who had adopted from Guatemala and at the AGM and Summer Party, following the airing of this programme, the parents were so concerned and suspicious of each other they would not allow anyone to use camcorders to video their children playing at the party and there was a heated discussion about whether pre-adopters should be allowed to be members. The argument they gave was that if the group no longer had pre-adoption members this would reduce the chance of people posing as prospective adopters in order to get information to use in a negative way. However, there was also the feeling that by voicing such concerns implied that there was something to hide - which is vehemently denied by everyone. Also, members who had themselves joined the group as pre-adopters and had benefited from the support; advice and guidance received during this period felt it would be a pity to deny future adopters the same level of support etc. In fact, for some members, one motive for continued involvement in the group was to give this very same support to future adopters.

Another situation that had arisen previously in relation to the issue of pre-adoption membership was when a journalist, who was hoping to adopt, had become a member of the group and asked for a member's address list. This is the norm and enables members to contact each other if they wish too, especially if there happens to be adopters living in their locality. However, in this instance the new member was honest and admitted that her motive for wanting other addresses was to see which, if any members, would contribute to an article she had been commissioned to write for a magazine. The chairperson of the group felt unwilling to supply addresses for this purpose and had come under attack from the journalist because the addresses were being withheld. It could be argued that it was up to individual members to decide, if approached, whether they wished to contribute to the article rather than that decision being made for them. The impact of the adverse publicity, over the years did at one point contribute to the group nearly folding and it is to the credit of the current organisers that they were able to hold the group together and continue.

Annual General Meeting of the GFA group

However, the focus and aims of this group and other groups can be seen to change over the years (Fleming 2000, Haworth 2000, Way and Mason 2000) influenced by a number of factors and a look at other items on the agenda of the annual general meeting of GFA illustrates this. During a more recent Guatemalan Families Association AGM (2000), at which the researcher was present, discussion focused on ways in which they could, as an organisation, counter the negative impressions many people had about adoptions from Guatemala. They were concerned about how their children would feel as they got older if, or when, they heard about the stories written in the press and seen on the television. One suggestion put forward was to set up a project in Guatemala, with the assistance of an existing reputable charitable organisation, and raise funds for a long-term development programme. Such a scheme would have a number of benefits beyond helping those directly involved in the project by putting something back into Guatemala. The setting up of such a project would create a newsworthy story, which indirectly would be about adoption by giving a positive image of families who adopt from Guatemala and their commitment to that country.

Another item on the agenda was proposing that GFA joined forces with the El Salvador Association because membership and participation within the El Salvador Association group was waning. Parents were finding that as their children were getting older they and the parents were less enthusiastic about meetings. Organisers of GFA decided to defer amalgamation of the two groups for the present time because the additional work involved would have a detrimental affect on current members. However, what it did do was highlight potential future problems for their own group and a note was made that a conscious effort would be needed to make sure a range of activities were provided which would appeal to the older children - some of the parents were already experiencing a lack of interest amongst their children about attending the Annual Summer Party.

The final item on the agenda focused around ways of retaining interest in the group for those with older children. It was clear that the vast majority of those attending functions were those with quite small children, up to about six years of age. One argument against changing the types of activities was that there were not enough families with older children attending to warrant changing the format but, of course the other side to this argument is that there were fewer attending simply because the activities were inappropriate for older children. What was not discussed was whether it was just the type of activities offered which did not appeal to the older children and their families or whether being a member of the group was perhaps no longer of interest or important to the parents or the children. Perhaps families were growing in confidence in their status as intercountry adoption family members and no longer needed the advice, guidance and support offered by the group. An alternative suggestion could be to look at the research of Brottveit (1999) mentioned earlier, where it was found that many adoptees were not interested in belonging to country-specific groups. This may be because as adoptees get older they do not want to identify with people with similar ethnic origins as themselves but prefer to identify with the majority UK, white population.

Differences in opinion about the benefits of GFA membership

Several people, during the interviews, when asked about group membership and their level of interest and involvement, seemed to indicate that prior to adoption, and for a few years immediately after the adoption, levels of interest were high but as the years passed so did their level of commitment to the group. This was raised during one of the interviews when the family explained what they had got from being a member of GFA:

"[I] went to have a look at the babies. I'd never seen a Guatemalan baby. I had seen Mexican babies. So I went and I took one of the boys, the youngest, and a friend and we went to meet the families and have a look at the babies just to put right in my mind we were doing the right thing. And of course we were totally convinced." (07)

However, this same mother admits that she is unsure about the purpose and focus of such groups and consequently was unsure how long her membership and group commitment will last:

"I have reservations about the group because what they are doing is keeping Guatemala at the fore front of their children's minds. Parents are learning Spanish, they are teaching the kids Spanish. You can get posters with the alphabet in Spanish. I also think that keeping Guatemala so much in the forefront of their minds they are going to have some sort of identity crisis cos these kids are English. I will answer all her questions and I will tell her fully every single thing. Now that is my own strong feeling and I think the Guatemalan Society has gone a little bit over the top with their Guatemalan side." (07)

Unlike the above example there were many who thought that one of the main advantages and purpose of being a member of the group was to learn the culture of the children's birth country:

"We have been to a lot of the meetings over the last five years. We have a number of good friends who have adopted from Guatemala and we have organised a summer party for the northern region. I think it is really important. It's a good thing for information about cultural things and information about Guatemala. Good friendships." (15)

The above differences of opinion amongst the members of GFA about the purpose of being a member of the group have been resolved at an individual level i.e. the family who was unsure about the focus of the group did not try to change the group but preferred instead to discontinue their active membership.

10.4 Services to Adoptive Parents

It is apparent from the accounts above that adopters gain many different types of support both from their own families and other families who have also adopted from overseas. However, within the remit of *The Hague Convention on the International Co-operation and Protection of Children in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* (1993) all central

authorities¹²³ are required to promote the development of post adoption services for families who have adopted overseas. Formal support in relation to statutory services in the UK has since the 1976 *Adoption Act*, been a duty of local authorities who have to provide support services which meet the needs of all members of the adoption triangle. However, the Act does not specify what these services should be and this is left up to the discretion of individual social service departments, which in turn means there have been wide variations in the type, quantity and quality of services provided. In addition, these duties were written with domestic adoption in mind and, although they do not preclude intercountry adoption families accessing services, they have not, in the past, been targeted at ICA families.

Families who adopt children from overseas may have had their initial Home Study Assessment done by the Local Authorities and this could be considered 'support'. However, as was highlighted in chapter four, about the process of adopting from overseas, many families do not consider these assessments as 'support' because not all offered support is perceived as supportive (O'Neill). It was often the case that social workers were lacking in experience of intercountry adoption and were unable to offer the types of support prospective adopters were looking for. There were occasions when families felt challenged about their decision to adopt from overseas and there were no examples of local authority social workers with experience of intercountry adoption and all had little if any knowledge of the processes in different countries. Therefore, they were unable to guide the adopters through the procedures in a way they would have hoped. There have also been reports from other research that some families find it hard to return to social services for support because of the way they have been treated (Selman and Wells 1996) and Beckett et al (1999) in their research with families adopting from Romania. One of the main problems seemed to be that the parents did not feel that they were working in partnership with the social workers and were not being given the

¹²³ In the UK this is the Department of Health (DoH) – from 2004 transferred to the Department of Education and Skills.

information they wanted. O'Neal (2000) suggests that this perceived lack of support is more about, 'omission rather than commission' (p19).

However, an example of a post adoption service, which could be offered by all local authorities to overseas adopters, is one similar to the parenting skills course organised by Oxford Social Services. This pilot scheme included both pre-adoption and post-adoptive parents. Despite the focus being on general parenting skills rather than on adoptive parenting skills the evaluation of the course was seen as 'overwhelmingly positive' (Gilkes and Klimes 2003) and Oxford Social Services intend to continue offering the course in the future.

10.4.1 Adoption support services offered by voluntary agencies

Pre-adoption information and support

Voluntary agencies have a role to play in pre-adoption and post-adoption support. The two main sources of information and pre-adoption support in England and Wales for families adopting from overseas are OASIS and the Overseas Adoption Helpline (OAH). OASIS began in 1995 and is run by adoptive parents who give their time and expertise gained from their own experiences to help those just beginning the adoption process. All volunteers are unpaid and the group is non-profit making with any funds raised from the sale of fact sheets and membership fees being donated to orphanages and charities caring for destitute children overseas. One of their main aims is to give the kind of advice, information and emotional support to new adopters that were not available to them when they were going through the process. OASIS believe that all prospective adopters have the right to timely, accurate information and that the best people to give this information are those who have been through the process themselves. As part of their remit they also provide information during the pre-adoption stage about issues that would traditionally be considered post-adoption concerns such as racism, self-esteem problems, searching for birth parents and returning to birth countries (Fleming 2000). OASIS also encourages what is referred to as a 'buddying' system whereby they link parents who have

successfully adopted with prospective adopters who are living near to each other. They make contact with each other and the family who has already successfully completed their adoptions will guide and support the prospective adopters through the process. The guidance and support will not only be in the form of practical advice about procedures but will include emotional support and encouragement.

The second organisation that provides pre-adoption information is the Overseas Adoption Helpline, which began with government funding in 1992 up until 1997 when funding was discontinued and OAH had to decide whether to try to find alternative funding so they could continue offering services to prospective adopters. This is what they did and in 1998 they were granted charitable status. They have teams of advisors who work on a sessional basis responding to callers and can be involved in consultation, training and in writing OAH publications (Haworth 2000). They are not a parent support group in the same sense as those discussed earlier or like OASIS, rather the staff are employees who have an interest in overseas adoption but some may also have adopted from overseas. The future role of both of these organisations is discussed in the following section about 'establishing an agency'.

Post adoption support services

The two main voluntary organisations providing post-adoption support in England are the Post Adoption Centre in London and After Adoption based in Manchester but with regional service contracts. In practice the services offered by these two agencies are available to all members of all adoption families but leaflets, websites and annual reports make no mention of any services specifically targeted at overseas adopters or adoptees. In addition neither organisation have shown any interest in attending NICA (Network for

Intercountry Adoption)¹²⁴ meetings to keep themselves up to date with issues and concerns related to overseas adoption - policy and practice.

A third organisation providing different forms of support to adopters is Adoption UK (until 1999 known as 'Parent to Parent Information on Adoption Services' or 'PPIAS'), established in 1971) which is a self-help group of adoptive parents who are there to support adopters before, during and after adoption. Their stated aim is to make adoptions work and to promote loving and supportive relationships between children and their adoptive families. In particular it offers a wealth of relevant experience from generations of adoptive families to prospective and established adopters and to all those who work with them. Their membership has a diverse range of adoptive parents and families, including couples, single parents, ethnic minorities and families who are multi-racial by birth, marriage and/or adoption, lesbian and gay adopters and families with disabilities. Adoption UK offers an impressive range of training programmes and adoption related publications many of which overseas adopters might find useful in the future. However, none of the families in this study group had been members of Adoption UK or PPIAS so that it was not possible to fully evaluate the relevance of their services to overseas adopters.

Support in the form of advice is also available from *International Social Service* (ISS) who have provided an information and documentation service since 1997; they are members of NICA and representatives regularly attend the meetings in London and they publish monthly newsletters reporting on available research, conferences and legislation updates. They are an accessible worldwide resource with a genuine interest in intercountry adoption.

¹²⁴ Members of NICA include representatives of LASSD's, International Social Services, BAAF, the DoH, parent support group representative, lawyers, CICA, academics, OAH, Childlink.

10.4.2 Development of adoption support services in the future

In the *Adoption and Children Act* 2002 there is a clause about the responsibilities of Local Authority Social Services Departments to 'carry out an assessment of that person's needs for adoption support services' (s4.2). If this assessment decides a family is in need of support it is up to the local authority (LA) to decide whether it will provide this service - if they do a plan has to put into place. As stated in the Act there is no statutory duty to provide any such services, however the White Paper, *Adoption: A New Approach* (DoH 2000) states that LAs have 'a clear duty to provide post-adoption support, including financial support, planned jointly with local education authorities and the NHS, and other relevant agencies' (s6.27). It goes on to say that this support should be available for as long as it is needed. This has now become a key part of the new Act and the first set of regulations issued were those covering *New Arrangements for Intercountry Adoption and Adoption Support Services*: (DoH 2003a). The DoH circular LAC (2003) 12 outlines what services are to be provided by LAs for intercountry adoptive families. Implementation of the regulations was delayed until October 2003 but within the regulations each local authority has to appoint an adoption support services adviser (ASSA) who will 'signpost' people to appropriate services and will give information and advice about how they can access these services. In principle this is good and may be of help to intercountry adopters and may allow more adopters to learn about available services to families and children.¹²⁵ The aim is that the local authority will become the first 'port of call' for families in need of help and support. However, at this point in time it is difficult to evaluate whether the ASSA in Local Authority Social Services Departments will have the detailed knowledge about issues specific to adoption from overseas. In a similar way that social workers undertaking Home Study Assessments were lacking in experience and knowledge about overseas adoption, because the numbers of such adoptions in the UK are low, many individual advisers may be unable to gain the necessary experience.

¹²⁵ These can include services from education and health professionals.

The adoption support services advisers will in principle be able to give adoptive parents access to a wide range of support services or to support them in their dealings with mainstream services such as education and health. However there is no legal requirement to provide support and local authorities are allowed to “prioritise”, which is likely to mean that limited funds are directed to those who have adopted looked after children with special needs. Financial support - in the form of “adoption allowances” - is likely to be allocated on a means-test basis determined by each authority so that there will be a “post-code lottery”. Most overseas adopters are anyway unlikely to qualify, as only those with a reasonably high income are likely to have been able to take on the many costs of adopting from abroad.

10.5 Establishing an Agency

One way forward for intercountry adoption in the UK would be to develop agencies that specialise in intercountry adoption. A major concern of the majority of adoptive parents interviewed has been the lack of expertise, guidance and support from social workers working for the LASSD. Parents who had Home Study Assessments done by independent social workers were more satisfied about the way the procedure had been carried out. They did not feel they were being judged and they felt these social workers were more sympathetic, supportive and knowledgeable. In addition to this lack of expertise and experience of LASSDs during the adoption process in the UK it was also the lack of constructive advice about making links with the sending countries which was seen as problematic. An additional aspect of support which is often not considered is during the time families spend in the country of origin. Unlike their American counterparts who often travel in a group to collect their children, British couples generally travel alone. During this time they have no one there to give them support and reassurance. Government officials manage the adoption process in China and families always have an idea about the set stages of the official procedures which allows a certain sense of security. However, this does not mean families would not appreciate having support during this stressful period. Families adopting from Sri Lanka and the Latin American countries had contact with lawyers or staff representing their lawyers who will

guide them through the legal procedures but, in the majority of cases there will be little, if any, personal support and reassurance.

This lack of support and feeling of isolation was highlighted by one family (02) who, during their time in Sri Lanka felt they were 'completely on their own' with no one to support them. Despite suggesting that generally they had not felt the need for support and both husband and wife being happy to be supportive to each other, the mother did say how it would have been good to have someone with them during their four-week stay in Sri Lanka. She explained how they had met another adopting couple on the bus back to the airport and after getting into conversation with them it emerged they had both been in Sri Lanka at the same time but had been staying in different hotels. She went on to say that:

"If we had known we could have got together and gone round Sri Lanka with each other but we didn't know. We only found out the night we came home."(02)

Thus by implication, it would have been good to have someone to share the experience and to have been mutually supportive. Since this meeting a friendship has developed and the two families have maintained contact and they try to meet up once or twice a year.

It is the lack of such support in, and links with the country of origin, which has been used to argue the case for a dedicated intercountry adoption agency. One aspect of the work of such agencies could be that of mediation where close links would be made with similar agencies in the sending countries. Families would therefore have support, via these links developed by the agencies, when they travel to the sending countries to collect their children. There would be better control and reassurance about the placement element of the adoption where prospective adopters and agencies in both countries would work together when decisions were being made about finding new homes for children in need of a family.

However, this would only be one of the roles for such agencies. Other roles would/could include provision of comprehensive information about intercountry adoption, preparing and assessment of parents for adoption with a major responsibility being that of mediation - making and maintaining links with sending countries. Other roles could include reporting back to the sending countries about the children after they have come to live in the UK with their adoptive families. Finally, they could offer a range of post-adoption support services to both parents and children (Selman 1998). The main point being that somebody needs to be responsible for these tasks and at the present time there is nowhere that prospective adopters can turn to for support during the process in the sending country or where adoptive families can turn for support after completion of the adoption if they encounter problems. The situation today in the UK is that prospective adopters have to make their own arrangements with the country of origin via contacts they may have overseas or employing agents (usually lawyers) working on their behalf.

However, in the 1992 Adoption Law Review (DoH 1992) this type of 'going it alone' was seen as problematic. In the White Paper (Cm2288, HMSO 1993) the government noted that registered agencies could be authorised to arrange adoptions but they did not indicate whether this was to include direct links with sending countries. Having no dedicated ICA agency has meant certain countries will not consider prospective adopters from the UK – because there is no agency mediating on their behalf and they will only work with accredited agencies, not individuals.

The debate about the advantage of an agency offering a comprehensive range of services similar to those mentioned earlier and similar to those operating in the Scandinavian countries was forwarded by CICA (The Campaign for Intercountry Adoption)¹²⁶ as far back as 1992. They advised that the UK was in need of an 'effective and reliable intercountry adoption system' part of which would be the formation of a specialist

¹²⁶ Response to the Inter-Departmental Review of Adoption Law, March 1992.

agency with sole responsibility for intercountry adoption. They suggested that a number of such agencies could be organised on a regional basis each reporting to a national agency possibly based in London for ease of access to Embassies and Consulates of countries from which adoptions were taking place. The range of services each agency could supply includes the home study assessment of prospective adopters, arranging the legal and immigration formalities and undertaking necessary liaison between agencies and authorities in sending countries. Currently the home study assessment is done by approved agencies with the latter two services being carried out by the adopters themselves.

After almost ten years of debate about the benefits of having 'stand alone' intercountry adoption agencies within the *Adoption and Children Act* 2002 and the subsequent Regulations (DoH 2003d) have now created the opportunity for specialist agencies to be set up. Therefore, the debate moves on to who would be the best providers of such services and whether any of the existing agencies working in the field of intercountry adoption have the potential or the desire to take on these new responsibilities? This is an issue in which the UK could learn lessons from other countries and particularly the Scandinavian countries who have longer a history of intercountry adoption.

Andersson (2000) writing about the thirty-year history of the Adoption Centre (Adoption Centrum) in Sweden shows how a group organised by adoptive parents in 1969, grew over the following thirty years to become one of the largest authorised adoption agencies in Sweden being responsible for about sixty percent of all overseas adoptions. The Adoption Centre is responsible for pre and post adoption services supporting parents from when they first ask for information about adopting from overseas through to returning home with their children and any ensuing post adoption problems they may encounter. In Sweden *Adoption Centrum*, the largest agency, started as a parent's group involving those who had adopted from abroad independently and has now developed into

leading proponent of agency-only adoptions (Andersson 2000). This suggests that there may be a potential for groups such as OASIS to be accredited as an agency in the UK.

Selman and White (1994, 2000) outline the advantages of accredited agencies whose remit would include that of mediating with agencies in sending countries. One such advantage is that these agencies would be eligible for membership of EurAdopt, an umbrella organisation for accredited non-profit making agencies undertaking intercountry adoptions. They are responsible for the working methods of its representatives and workers at all stages of the adoption process with additional benefits which includes a shared concern for children and a commitment to high ethical standards (Sterky, 2000). EurAdopt have biannual conferences where all member organisations are invited and there are opportunities to exchange ideas about best practice and issues which may be of concern to member countries: non-members and Central Authorities may attend the 'open day' at the end of each meeting. If the UK were to have specialist organisations for intercountry adoption they would, in the future be able to apply for membership of EurAdopt and if successful attend closed sessions. An additional advantage as suggested by Andersson (2000) is that non-governmental organisations can lobby for issues in a way no government department can which could have the advantage of getting intercountry adoption on the political agenda if necessary.

It is clear that at the present time there are no obvious contenders to offer a comprehensive, pre and post adoption service. However, within the government regulations there is no stipulation that new agencies would have to offer a full range of services and it is most likely agencies would build on their existing knowledge base and specialise in aspects of overseas adoption for which they already have experience. Again there are examples of agencies in Europe who offer limited range of services. Duinkerken and Geerts (2000) outline the system in the Netherlands and the different agencies which contribute to the overall system. To begin there is the Bureau VIA (Organisation for Information on Intercountry Adoption) who are responsible for sending prospective adopters information about adopting from overseas and they provide the

compulsory preparation classes. Once parents have attended a preparation course they can apply to one of the six mediating agencies who will make links with a country and will identify a child for them. Each of these mediating agencies is responsible for providing post-adoption support for the adoptive parents and the children for up to one year. After this first year WAN (Foundation Adoption Aftercare) continues the after care to families but WAN also have an extended remit which includes 'to educate therapists, they establish parent support groups, and they make it possible for several welfare organisations to exchange thoughts and information on adoption' (p371).

More recently WAN and VIA have amalgamated so now the one organisation provide preparation and post adoption services for adopting parents and there will be a newly operational 'Helpline' (Kobussen 2003). The Dutch model differs from the Swedish system in that providers of preparation courses and post adoption support do not provide mediation services. However, there is a major problem when looking to other countries for different models of providing support for overseas adopters; as with all comparative policy recommendations caution is needed about the transferability of policies from one country to another each with its own history and culture.

The parents in this study did not have such an agency to provide this level of service but it was apparent listening to their stories that many of them would have appreciated working in partnership with an organisation that had both experience of knowledge about intercountry adoption.

10.6 Summary and Discussion

Support is the key to successful adoptions. Good support begins during the adoption process and continues post-placement and post adoption and can be offered by formal or informal sources. The maintenance of a strong system of support by family, friends and community is seen as vital if there are to be positive outcomes in adoption placements

(Groza and Ileana 2002, Lowe et al 1999). Despite feelings of uncertainty about when to start telling about their intentions to adopt from overseas, the majority of families in this sample group experienced high levels of support from family and friends even where the immediate response from some family members, usually prospective grandparents, had not been as enthusiastic as they would have wanted. The doubts expressed by some grandparents indicated that they valued fecundity and the importance of blood ties more than younger generations of either the family or friends.

From the above examination of the development, activities and benefits of group membership as experienced by the parents, it appears that, for some members enthusiasm about the group begins to wane after a period of time. Also, as the children were getting older the parents were finding that they too were losing interest in attending social events organised by the group. This had prompted one group (The El Salvador Association) to consider discontinuing and the Guatemalan Families Association to consider changing the range of activities offered to try and think more about what teenage adoptees may find attractive.

However, the best way forward may not be to change the range of activities but to organise groups for adoptees only, not including the parents. In Sweden a number of groups have been formed by adoptees from different countries and in 1999 when the Adoption Centre was celebrating its 30th anniversary they formed a 24th branch which was for adoptees only (Andersson 2000 p362). There have also been a number of groups organised by Korean adoptees with at least seven such organisations in different European countries¹²⁷ (Sloth and Birkmose 2003).

¹²⁷ None in the UK because Korea will not allow children to be adopted here because we have no agencies with whom they can work with directly.

One of the many advantages of being a member of a parent support group was that the children were able to mix with other children who had been adopted from overseas and have different ethnic origins to their parents. For members of country-specific groups children had the opportunity to mix with children with similar ethnic origins and membership of the group could support them in learning about their cultural heritage. However, it has been suggested that a better way for children to learn about their cultural heritage is to mix directly with people from similar origins (Kirton 2000a). This could be via cultivating friendships with individuals with similar origins (Carstens and Julia 2000) or, by living in ethnic mixed neighbourhoods or by becoming a member of social groups made up of members from the same ethnic origins Kirton (2000a). This is seen as preferable to belonging to a group which consists of white adults and 'black' children. A closer look at the impact of the local community environment has been considered in more detail in chapter eight when there was an examination of the importance of multicultural links for all members of newly formed bi-cultural families.

The development of specialist agencies has been seen as having many advantages and recent legislation has paved the way for new agencies to apply for accredited status as Adoption Support Agencies. However, one disadvantage is that the number of countries with which links could be developed would have to be limited if they were to be effective. This would then in turn restrict the choices of prospective adopters by limiting the choice of countries from which they were able to adopt, if they chose to go through such agencies. However, it could be suggested that the advantages and safeguards of using such specialist agencies outweigh this disadvantage and within the current system prospective adopters have to make early decisions about which country to adopt from and applications can only be made for one country at a time. Therefore, if there are problems during the process and it becomes clear that adoption from the chosen country is untenable the prospective adopters have to re-apply. Also, using accredited intercountry adoption agencies would not be compulsory and existing procedures would continue if adopters preferred to 'go it alone', although the ultimate goal might be to have mediation only through accredited agencies, as in Norway.

The parents in this study did not have such an agency to provide this level of service but it was apparent listening to their stories that many of them would have appreciated working in partnership with an organisation that had both experience of knowledge about intercountry adoption.

Several parents had gained great satisfaction from working their way through the process of adopting a child from overseas but it was clear that there had been many points during this process that they would have appreciated reassurance about what they were doing and how they were doing it. The experience of the families adopting from China did at times get frustrated at the slowness of the process and the length of time each stage was taking but they also appreciated knowing that this was the norm rather than a problem. They felt confident about the legality of the process because it was managed by government departments in both countries so despite being called 'over bureaucratic' by one parent.

Conclusion

The theme of adoption support has been developed at some length in this chapter and it is important to stress again that "support" is a concept employed to describe many different things from acceptance, approval, recognition, friendship and companionship to advice, information, and counselling about adoption and to the recognition of the particular needs of overseas adopted children adopted, in education, health and financial support services. The mixture of support provided by each of the sources discussed above will vary and for many parents there will be a need to rely on several sources if a full range of support is to be accessed.

All aspects of support had been important to the families studied but often acceptance and recognition was dependent on a wide range of informal contacts and contact with statutory services had been affected by the atmosphere of approval or disapproval surrounding the very action of adopting a child from abroad. Sometimes changes in

formal services can carry with them elements of recognition and approval which go beyond any practical help offered – as in the introduction of a right to “adoption leave” or the clear statement that LAs must offer advice to all adoptive families.

The discussion on specialist agencies indicates that one possible advantage of these is that they can provide practical help, including information and post-adoption support, but also are more likely to offer the acceptance and recognition which many of the parents interviewed found wanting in contact with local authority social workers. The challenge is to ensure that this is not at the expense of retaining a focus on the needs of the child which must be the “paramount consideration” under the 2002 *Adoption and Children Act*. In the continued absence of such agencies – especially in the area of mediation – the immediate challenge is to develop a more informed and sympathetic approach from statutory bodies working closely with those Voluntary Adoption Agencies approved for work with overseas adopters and existing specialist agencies such as the Overseas Adoption Helpline. It is hoped that the views of the families interviewed in this study can contribute to the development of such an approach.

Chapter 11: Summary Findings and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

11.1 Introduction and Findings

The previous chapter focused on one of the key features of the research, the various types of “support” both before and after the adoption, sought and received by the parents interviewed and the sources of that support. The researcher then explored a number of alternative ways in which the system of adopting from overseas might be improved via the development of agencies specialising in intercountry adoption. This final chapter aims to highlight other key issues emerging from the current research, and will examine the situation today in relation to intercountry adoption and recent changes in legislation; finally identifying areas that can benefit from further research.

The central focus of the research was on providing an insight into the experiences of parents who have adopted children from overseas in relation to both their pre-adoption and post-adoption experiences. A key feature of this research is that it has enabled adoptive parents to have a voice and to express their concerns about their experiences of adopting from overseas. Overall accounts show that there is no simple identifiable or typical experience but a number of issues were raised by the majority of parents, including where to turn to for support; difficulties in obtaining accurate information; and lack of clarity in the system in both the UK and the sending countries. It also became evident how much adopters were dependent upon each other for support and guidance both during the adoption process and after their children had come to live with them in the UK.

The results provide a valuable overview of both pre-adoption and post-adoption experiences unlike other research in the UK (Mostyn and Bennett 1991, Bagley 1993, Humphrey and Humphrey 1993 and Groothues et al 1998/99), which has tended to

concentrate on one or the other. The more recent experience of those adopting from China indicate that parents welcome the assurance of working within a system which has structure but at the same time they show how little the problems of the past have changed and many of the adoptive parents continued to face many similar issues i.e. lack of information, feelings of uncertainty and a sense of anxiety and dependency on other adopters for support. These findings have been supported by those of a study in Scotland where adopters completing a postal questionnaire highlighted a number of similar issues (Selman and Mason 2003). Although this thesis has been a small-scale study and the results cannot be regarded as representative of all those adopting from abroad they can contribute to our understanding of the impact of policy and practice on the parent's experience of adopting from overseas.

11.1.1 Home Study Assessments

A part of the adoption process which all prospective parents have to go through is the home study assessment but this was not accepted by most parents in a positive way and this may have a lot to do with the fact that the term 'Home Study Assessment' carries with it a view of 'weeding out' suitable or non-suitable parents in a judgemental way which made many parents concerned about giving the right impression and making sure they gave the 'right' answers. Even when Home Study Assessments were done by independent social workers, who were perceived as being more sympathetic to the parents, parents were uncertain about how to manage the situation and all would have preferred not to have gone through the assessment experience. It would therefore, be better if agencies or local authorities could see their role as facilitators where the process becomes that of agencies and social workers and prospective parents working together to think about the issues related to adoption, giving the parents information from which they are able to make an informed decision about whether they want to adopt a child from overseas i.e. parent preparation being a preferred term. Therefore, it might be better if more time was spent educating and preparing prospective adoptive parents instead of assessing them, particularly because the assessment process causes applicants to become nervous which in turn prevents them from learning (Philips 1999). Writing about

guidelines prepared for the Irish government's development of a framework for intercountry assessment, Simmonds and Haworth (2000) note that prospective adopters 'need access to knowledge and information that enables them to assess themselves as ready (or not ready) for the particular issues that adoption and intercountry adoption presents' (p259). One of the best ways to gain this knowledge and information could be by attending preparation classes.

11.1.2 Preparation classes

No parents in this study had attended preparation classes or courses and this was typical of adoptions during the time period these adoptions were taking place. Adoptive parents today are more and more likely to be invited to attend such courses/training. However, there are still some practical problems; firstly the content and applicability of the courses and second the regularity and timing of courses. Courses run by local authorities are usually for any prospective adopters and cover a wide range of issues but the focus is usually domestic adoption and the adoption of older children and the issues these parents have to address are very different to those adopting babies from overseas. In the Selman and Mason (2003) study of Scottish families who had adopted from overseas, who attended preparation classes there were a number of issues. One issue raised was the focus which was either too general or too much about China to the neglect of other countries; and the regularity and timing which was seen as potentially causing delays and increasing the time taken to complete adoptions from overseas.

It would seem reasonable to conclude that similar problems would have occurred at the time this group of families were adopting from overseas. Numbers were low and the families were scattered throughout England, which would have made the organising of preparation classes difficult. However, it might also be suggested that the majority of the families would have appreciated the opportunity to attend preparation classes. One feature of many such classes is having parents who have already adopted from overseas come and talk about their experiences and spend time answering questions from

prospective adopters. This is often seen as an invaluable part of the preparation classes (Mason and Selman 2003). All the parents had joined one of the parents support groups which indicates that they value the support offered by other adoptive parents.

One argument in favour of preparation classes for prospective adopters is that they give parents realistic expectations because adoptive parents are often accused of thinking their love will be enough to overcome any problems that may occur after the adoption and refuse to believe that adoptive parenthood has to face additional difficulties (Saclier 2000). It is not clear whether the parents in the current study started with either of these beliefs but it is apparent that they all faced and overcame problems as they occurred. However, they did not believe that problems were inevitable and the majority of families, when asked suggested that any problems they had were nothing more, or less than other families have to face.

Those families who spoke about problems their children were having had a tendency to play-down the seriousness of these problems. Three families explained that their children were having psychological support to help them through difficulties they were having and there were three others whose children were getting educational support in the classroom. But no parents spoke about these problems in a way that implied they felt they were insurmountable. They would have preferred that their children did not need this kind of help but it was not felt to be impacting on their relationships and commitment to the children. If anything the issues were understated in a similar way as parents adopting Down's syndrome children (Mason et al 1999). In that study it seemed that parents were expecting problems to be worse than they were and managed ensuing difficulties as if they were everyday occurrences. Possibly the overseas adopters were also expecting problematic behaviours or situations to arise which they would need to cope with and then found the reality of the situation was not as bad as expected. However, it is clear that they did not expect that their love would either ensure they had no problems or that love alone would make them go away. They have not failed to 'admit that adoptive

parenthood has to face additional difficulties in comparison to biological parenthood' (Saclier 2000 p59)

11.1.3 Access to information about child

The issue of access to accurate information was a theme running throughout the thesis, beginning with the pre-adoption stage when parents were struggling to find out how to proceed. However, the availability and accessibility of information was important not only about adoption procedures but also about personal and medical information about the children. It was apparent in the accounts from parents that being able to secure accurate and truthful background information and details about the history of their children was often difficult. Not only did differences in culture, language, terminology and the competence of medical resources influence the availability of information but also parents were unsure who to ask and whether they had a right to ask for information. Access and availability of information and the quality and reliability of information varied widely with, for example, parents adopting from China being given the least amount of information. All the parents adopting from Latin America and the USA had personal communication with the birth mothers and therefore more opportunities to ask questions and the remaining parents had different amounts of information in-between these two extremes. While it is reasonable to acknowledge that it may be difficult to get reliable information about the children, it is not reasonable to do nothing about this. Therefore, it must be a priority to make every effort to secure as much information as possible and provide documentation wherever possible. In addition, care should be taken to preserve and protect original documents and even in cases where data is transferred on to computers the original documents should be kept wherever possible. It is often of great significance to searching adoptees to see and to hold letters and other documents in the original rather than only notes about information contained in the letters. Even in cases where every effort has been made to acquire and preserve information there will be times when this falls short of the ideal but it is the commitment made to doing all that can be done within the limits of authority and circumstance which is important and will eventually affect positive changes.

11.1.4 Identity and birth country

The fourth part of the thesis was looking at ways in which parents incorporated their child's birth country and birth culture into their everyday lives and what was found was that the importance given to issues of identity differed considerably but with three or four identifiable activities/strategies being implemented by parents. There were parents who engaged in a number of activities/strategies, which focused on encouraging their children to acquire an identity reflecting their ethnic origins but other parents did not consider identifying with the country of origin important and they gave the matter little if any emphasis. The best way for children to develop an identity, which reflects their ethnic and cultural origin, would be to have an interplay between living and learning or being taught about the culture of the birth country. Two of the main ways of doing this were identified during the study. The first was via membership of parent support groups, which all families had done at some time. When families are active members of such groups it is an opportunity for parents and children to engage with and mix with families with similar backgrounds and possibly with similar ethnic origins. However, throughout the interviews it was apparent that enthusiasm about membership waned over time and both parents and children lost interest in the groups' activities. The second way is via the community in which adopters live and what was found was that families who lived in mainly white neighbourhoods also placed least importance on their children having an ethnic identity. However, families living in neighbourhoods, which were multicultural did not necessarily engage with people from different ethnic backgrounds, nor are their children specially choosing to have friends who are from similar ethnic origins as themselves. The children who were being given the most opportunity to learn about their origins were those whose parents were making a concerted effort to incorporate this into their everyday lives. This is important because as Kirton (2000a) states it is parental interest which directly influences children's level of engagement, and interest in their ethnic and cultural heritage.

Generally, levels of interest in ethnic diversity were not high for many families, despite a passing acknowledgement that it might at some time become important to the children. At the time of the interviews parents were busy raising their children with concerns similar to all parents and a sense that there was not a lot of time for the 'additional tasks' that overseas adopters are expected to have. There was far more inclination to encourage the children to identify with the community in which they were living. However, questions have been raised as to whether children in fact need to have high levels of input about their ethnicity and race¹²⁸ with Ballis Lal (2001) asking whether one aspect of a person i.e. ethnicity 'trumps' all other aspects of selfhood. Therefore, it should not be assumed that because most parents were not currently placing much emphasis on their child's ethnic origins it does not mean that this will not change, as the children get older or that the children will be disadvantaged because of this.

Parents worry about what needs to be done and whether they are handling the issues in the most appropriate way. The resistance and lack of interest shown by some of the children undermines some parent's intent and they take this lack of interest as a sign that they should wait until the children show an interest and begin to ask questions. However, there are examples of one or two parents who had an interest in their child's birth country which they are pursuing for their own benefit but at the same time hoping that their children would take an interest one day. Other parents were determined to continue their involvement with their child's birth country, despite the child's apparent lack of interest, because they felt the children should to be encouraged in different ways to take an interest in their birth culture. Either of these two strategies are likely to make it easier for the children in the future if they want to engage with aspects of their birth country culture, to approach their parents at a later date.

¹²⁸ Wide range of literature about transracial adoption is discussed in Introduction to Part Four including debate about the importance of ethnicity and race.

11.2 Policy and Practice Implications

One aim of the research has been to inform both policy and practice because the vast range of differences between procedures in sending countries make it difficult for adoption agencies, whether they are local authority or voluntary, to reassure adopters about exact procedures and timescales and a number of recommendations about different ways of managing overseas adoptions have been made in the previous chapter. The following sections will consider the role of different agencies involved in the intercountry adoption process in the UK and consider the implications for policy and practice of the research findings presented in this thesis

11.2.1 The role of the central authority

The role of the Central Authority is to make sure things run smoothly and procedures are clear to follow and are adhered to. However, currently there is a problem because as identified by the ISS in their submission to the special commission on the practical operation of the Hague Convention (Hague Conference 2001) many central authorities, not only ours in the UK, are under resourced and under staffed.¹²⁹ It is estimated (ISS for Education & 2000) that currently the UK central authority within the Department of Health (DoH)¹³⁰ only has half the number of staff it ideally needs to process applications in a quick and efficient manner. In the latest AFAA newsletter an article suggests that waiting times for processing of documents via the DoH are as long as five months (Gibbons 2003). An additional concern is about whether the Central Authority will move from the DoH now that adoption services have moved to the Department of Education and Skills and whether during this transition additional delays will occur.

¹²⁹ It is suggested there are staff shortages, equipment shortages and the qualifications of the staff in adoption and child protection matters are often insufficient.

¹³⁰ Responsibility for intercountry adoption transferred to the Department of Education and Skills in 2004.

11.2.2 The role of local authorities

Despite much criticism in the past of Local Authority Social Services Departments about their ideological opposition to intercountry adoption and their less than helpful approach there is no need to assume that this situation cannot change or in fact has not already begun to change. The more recent adopters in this study who had a local authority home study assessment found social workers were not opposed to adoption from overseas but were lacking in knowledge and expertise. There is no reason why social workers in local authorities cannot gain adequate training and knowledge about intercountry adoption and currently British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) are offering a series of one day seminars about the 'Adoption Support Regulations - the framework, the issues, what works' in London, York and Wales. However, there is no mention of special issues related to intercountry adoption and if the number of overseas adoptions continue to be low it is unlikely many social workers will get the opportunity to use knowledge gained via training or to gain experience and expertise. At the same time the Department of Health were running a series of seminars in 2003 for managers and adoption support workers, which aims to further understanding of the impact of the new *Adoption Support Services (Local Authority) (England) Regulations 2003*.

11.2.3 The role of voluntary adoption agencies

Currently the six registered agencies handle both domestic and intercountry adoption and there is no reason why this cannot continue. However, there is an argument for specialist agencies taking responsibility for certain aspects of intercountry adoption and a number of models have been considered in the previous chapter. The situation today in the UK is that Norwood Ravenswood and PACT have shown an interest in the role of mediation with Norwood having a number of links with ex Soviet Union Countries and Childlink foresee a time when they take on the role of 'matching' parents and children and increase levels of post-placement support - at the present time they have contracts with local authorities to support parents during the time before they re-adopt their child after returning to the UK from child's birth country (Hesslegrave 2000).

11.2.4 The role of other non-governmental organisations

There are other non-statutory organisations who have, over the years played a key role in intercountry adoption and could be considered as having the potential for developing their services further and taking on further responsibilities. The Overseas Adoption Helpline (OAH), AFAA and OASIS though not registered adoption agencies have between them been the main source of support and information for all of the adopters in this study. Each in their own way has something to offer to future adopters but, at this point, it is unclear whether AFAA and OASIS want to extend beyond what they are already doing or would apply for registration as an Adoption Support Agency, but OAH has shown an interest in developing their services (see earlier about joint ventures with Childlink) and formalising their links with adoption agencies overseas.

11.2.5 The role of parent groups

Earlier in the thesis it was suggested there is a role in the overseas adoption process for mediating agencies to help facilitate the matching of children and parents. However, it is currently unclear who would be able or willing to undertake this role but the country-specific parent groups with the links they have with the sending countries would appear to be an obvious choice. It is difficult to evaluate, however, whether parents who currently give their time on a voluntary basis would wish to make this into a formal arrangement.

In conclusion, the key is that support may be best provided by specialist agencies but will this make things easier for parents? If there are to be agencies offering specialist intercountry adoption services it is likely that there will be but a few of them which can be located in different parts of the country or more than likely will be located in the South of England causing access problems in both time and money for prospective adopters living in other regions.

11.2.6 What difference will the Adoption and Children Act 2002 make?

The final draft of this thesis was written against the background of Parliamentary debates on major reforms in adoption legislation and the absorption into the *Adoption and Children Act 2002* of the unimplemented clauses of the 1999 *Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act*. Although the Act is now in the process of being implemented the process of issuing guidance and regulations following a lengthy period of consultation will not be completed until the latter part of 2005.

In one respect this has made it difficult to make 'recommendations' because many of the needs identified by parents in my study have been addressed and further changes in the law are unlikely for many years. The aim, therefore, will be to consider, in the light of the findings presented in chapters 4 to 10, what seems important in ensuring that the new legislation improves the situation of families adopting from overseas and facilitates the process of adoption whilst ensuring that it is in the 'best interests of the child'. The thesis ends by arguing for the need to involve overseas adopters themselves in the process of intercountry adoption and to strengthen links between the UK and the States of origin from which the children come.

As a starting point it will be useful to identify the key developments resulting from the 1999 and 2002 Acts, where these have already improved actual or potential policy and practice. Then there will be a brief look at where more remains to be done to ensure that those adopting from overseas benefit from the wider changes to adoption law, policy and practice. To conclude there will be a look at the need for some major changes in the way intercountry adoption is organised in the UK and the potential role of adoptive parents in this.

The key developments in adoption legislation identified in the thesis include:

- * Ratification of the Hague Convention
- * Tightening of Regulations on 'bringing a child into the UK'

- * Prohibition of Private Home Studies
- * Registration of overseas adoption
- * Adoption Support organisations

However, these still leave a number of unresolved issues:

Will Adoption Support, including financial support, be available to overseas adopters?

Will the statistics on intercountry adoption be improved?

Will there be a genuine attempt to collect and store information on the background of children adopted from overseas?

Will the 'process' be made smoother and will unnecessary delays be avoided?

Will there be assurances that all potential overseas adopters have access to appropriate preparation courses and informed 'home study' assessments?

Will professionals involved - whether social workers, doctors or lawyers, be given training in the particular issues affecting overseas adopters and their children?

Two possible solutions stand out as the way forward and these include the development of specialist overseas adoption agencies as outlined in the previous chapter and the second is the implementation of Adoption Standards. The potential abandonment of the intercountry adoption standards, because it is thought that intercountry adoption issues can be incorporated into the National Minimum Standards,¹³¹ may undo all the positive moves which have been made via recent legislation. An examination of the second draft of the intercountry standards with the published Adoption Standards highlight clearly differences between domestic adoption and intercountry adoption. The two sections which are missing from the National Adoption Standards are section G: which relates to suggested standards for the 'Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Home Office', and

¹³¹ See Appendix G for the email from Cathy Morgan about the draft ICA standards.

section I: dealing with standards for the Central Authority - neither of which have a role to play in domestic adoption but have a major role in the process of adopting from overseas. A closer examination of almost every other section reveals differences between the two sets of 'standards'. Whether it is decided to continue with 'standards' for intercountry adoption or whether the decision is made to incorporate overseas adoption in with domestic adoption arrangements may prove the most significant factor in the future development of intercountry adoption.

11.3 The Future of Intercountry Adoption in the UK

As was indicated in chapter 3 about the history of intercountry adoption in the UK the countries from which overseas adopters adopt change over time for a number of different reasons and it will be of interest to know in the future where the children will come from. For the past five years a majority of children adopted from overseas have been baby girls from China, facilitated by the addition of China to the list of 'designated' countries. It seems likely that China will continue as a major source for the UK. Other countries featured in my study - e.g. Sri Lanka and the Latin American countries are sending fewer and fewer children for ICA (see Table 4.2.1). However, ratification of the Hague Convention should facilitate adoptions from other Convention countries but India who ratified shortly after the UK has well established links with Sweden, Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands and the United States and is unlikely to encourage adoptions to the UK while we have no mediating agency. Adoption from countries which have neither ratified or acceded to the convention and are not included in the list of 'designated countries' could become more difficult, especially where there are continuing suspicions of irregularities e.g. Cambodia and Vietnam. There has been speculation as to whether, overall, the number of overseas adoptions will increase following the ratification of the Hague Convention, but official figures published by the DfES indicate little change in the number of applications (home study reports) received in 2003 and 2004.

11.4 Limitations and Implications for Further Research

In most research it is beneficial to have follow-up studies but none more so than research about adoption. This study has been from the perspective of the parents but because changes over a life time can be dramatic, and issues which seem unimportant at one point in a child's life may become more of an issue as they grow up, there is a need to have ongoing research to find out about the impact of such changes. In support of this Saetersdal and Dalen (1999) found that problems that were most important for adoptees in their earlier study (Dalen and Saeterdal 1992) were no longer as important, and Irhammar and Cederblad (2000) found that the importance placed on looking different varied according to the adoptee's age. It is apparent from the parents' accounts that there are wide-ranging ideas about the importance given to the child's birth country and parental attitudes and awareness of racism in society. The impact of this on the children will only be known if or when research is done which includes their perspective. As the adoptees reach adolescence and move into young adulthood this will be a time when they experience greater self-awareness and self-consciousness and will ask questions about, who am I? Also, at the current time the main research is on developmental outcomes of adoptees adopted from Romania via the work of Professor Rutter and the English and Romanian Adoptees Research Team and therefore there is a need for research about adoptions from other countries, and the focus could be different - possibly a sociological or social policy perspective rather than a psychological perspective. It would also be interesting to visit the research after the full implementation of the *Adoption and Children Act 2002* with a full evaluation of the impact of this legislation.

In conclusion, the key is getting the balance right between enabling the parents versus the rights of the child. It would be hoped that with the introduction of new legislation and the ratification of the internationally accepted Hague Convention with the agreed standards of practice and controls, the UK the system will work to benefit both parents and the children. However, the current study has shown that what is most important is that parents and professionals work together, that there is a partnership from the beginning when parents first make an adoption application through to post adoption

support. In this way parents will feel more able to approach agencies, whether they are statutory or voluntary for guidance and support during and after the adoption of their children from overseas.

This thesis has been based on the views expressed by adoptive parents, but policy must clearly focus above all on the best interests of the child. What is clear is that in order to achieve this and meet the needs of the children, the needs of parents must also be recognised and support for them seen as enmeshed in providing the best family context for children whose previous experience has often been very traumatic.

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APPENDIX A: Postal Survey: Numbers of Children Adopted from each Country

Country of Origin	1st Child	2nd Child	3rd-5th Child	Totals	%
1.Brazil	7	4		11	7.2
2. Canada	1			1	0.6
3. Chile	3	1		4	2.6
4. China	3	1		4	2.6
5. Colombia	2	1		3	2.0
6. E. Europe	1	1		2	1.3
7. Ecuador	3	2		5	3.3
8. Egypt	1			1	0.6
9. El Salvador	13	5		18	11.8
10. Eretrea	1			1	0.6
11. Guatemala	11	6	1	18	11.8
12. Honuras	2			2	1.3
13. India	2	2	1	5	3.3
14 Jamaica	2			2	1.3
15. Latuia	0	1		1	0.6
16. Malaysia	1			1	0.6
17. Mexico	1			1	0.6
18. Paraguay	8	4	3	15	10.0
19. Peru	4	2		6	3.9
20. Philippines	1			1	0.6
21. Poland	1			1	0.6
22. Romania	6	1		7	4.6
23. Russia	1	1		2	1.3
24. Sri Lanka	12	4	1	17	11.1
25. Sudan	0		2	2	1.3
26. Taiwan	2	1		3	2.0
27. Thailand	4	3	2	9	6.0
28. USA	6	4		10	6.5
TOTALS	99	44	10	153	100%

APPENDIX B: Postal Questionnaire Accessing Sample

- * *Association for Families who have Adopted from Abroad (AFAA)* enclosed with their newsletter which was sent out at the beginning of December 1996 (no covering letter, no pre-paid envelopes) - have a number of affiliated members who may not be adopters.
- * *El Salvador Family Association* - were sent out with a covering letter written by group secretary (no pre-paid envelopes).
- * *Guatemala Support Group* - sent with their newsletter which included support for research in the editors letter (no pre-paid envelopes).
- * *Inter-country Adoption Social Worker Group (ICASWG)* - 189 questionnaires sent out to date with covering letters and pre-paid envelopes: - 19 returned undelivered.

Two further groups were approached at a later date:-

- * *Peru Adoptive Families Group* - 40 questionnaires sent out (4 returned undelivered), enclosed with their newsletter, plus pre-paid envelopes.
- * *Adopted Romanian Children (ARC)* - sent 400 included in their newsletter; pre-paid envelopes included, plus an article written by Kathy Mason and Peter Selman about the research. ARC was not approached initially because many of their members were taking part in a longitudinal developmental study by the MRC Child Psychiatry Research Centre, London (Rutter 1998) and it was felt they might begin to feel as if they were being “over researched”.

APPENDIX C: Interview Schedule

FAMILIES AND INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION

Parent's perceptions of the identity needs of their child and their perceived responsibility towards achieving a positive identity.

DECISION TO ADOPT

- * at the time of deciding to adopt did you know anyone else who had adopted?
- * how did you decide which country to adopt from?

PROCESS OF ADOPTING

- * where did you find/get support [*emotional/practical*] from?
- * what organisations/groups did you seek advice or information from?

HOME STUDY REPORT

- * was your Home Study a negative or a positive experience?
- * was race an issue when your Home Study was being done?
- * were you given advice about potential problems?

SUPPORT GENERALLY

- * has there been anyone in particular who has been supportive?
- * what type of support do you wish had been available during the adoption process?
- * are you a member of any parent support group?

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

- * prior links?
- * will you be making a visit to [.....] as a family?
- * what role, if any, do you think [*country*] will have for [...] in the future?
- * celebrate festivals, eat traditional foods,
- * artefacts around the house, wear traditional dress

BIRTH FAMILY

- * did you meet?
- * what information do you have to pass onto [...]?
- * what, if any, role you think they will have in the future for [*child*]?

RACE/CULTURE

- * have you or [*child*] had any negative experiences?
- * how do you expect to handle issues in the future?
- * do you consider your neighbourhood to be multicultural?

APPENDIX D: Characteristics of the Adopted Children

D.1: Numbers of children in each family - adopted and biological

Family ID	Number of Children		Gender of ICA Children		Country of Origin
	ICA	Other	F	M	
01.	1		1	-	China
02.	2		2	-	Sri Lanka, China
03.	1	1 domestic	1	-	China
04.	1		1	-	China
05.	1		1	-	China
06.	1		1	-	China
07.	1	4 birth	1	-	Guatemala
08.	1			1	Bulgaria
09.	1	2 birth	1	-	China
10.	2		1	1	Sri Lanka (x2)
11.	1		1	-	El Salvador
12.	1		-	1	Romania
13.	2		2	-	Philippines (x2)
14.	2		-	2	Sri Lanka (x2)
15.	2		1	1	Guatemala (x2)
16.	1		1	-	Sri Lanka
17.	1	2 birth	1	-	Romania
18.	2		1	1	USA
19.	1		1	-	Chile
20.	1		-	1	Romania
21.	2		2	-	Sri Lanka
22.	2		1	1	Sri Lanka
23.	1	3 birth	-	1	Peru
24.	1		1	-	China
25.	2		1	1	Brazil
26.	1		-	1	Brazil
27.	1		1	-	Sri Lanka
28.	1		-	1	Sri Lanka
29.	2		2	-	Ecuador (x2)
30.	1		-	1	Romania
31.	3	3 birth	3	-	Guatemala (x3)
Totals	43	14 + 1	29	14	

D.2: Summary details of children adopted from overseas

Family ID	Number of Children	Gender of Children	Birth Country	Year of Adoption*	Age at Adoption
01.	1	Female	China	C	1-2
02.	2	Female (x2)	Sri Lanka, China	B : C	Under 1; 1-2
03.	1	Female	China	C	1-2
04.	1	Female	China	C	1-2
05.	1	Female	China	C	1-2
06.	1	Female	China	C	1-2
07.	1	Female	Guatemala	C	Under 1
08.	1	Male	Bulgaria	B	1-2
09.	1	Female	China	C	1-2
10.	2	Female, Male	Sri Lanka (x2)	A : B	Under 1
11.	1	Female	El Salvador	A	Under 1
12.	1	Male	Romania	B	4 years
13.	2	Female	Philippines (x2)	A : B	1-2
14.	2	Male x2	Sri Lanka (x2)	A : A	Under 1
15.	2	Female, Male	Guatemala	C : C	Under 1
16.	1	Female	Sri Lanka	A	Under 1
17.	1	Female	Romania	B	2 years
18.	2	Male, Female	USA	C : C	Under 1
19.	1	Female	Chile	C	3 years
20.	1	Male	Romania	C	8 years
21.	2	Female, Male	Sri Lanka	A : A	Under 1
22.	2	Female (x2)	Sri Lanka	A : A	Under 1
23.	1	Male	Peru	B	Under 1
24.	1	Female	China	C	Under 1
25.	2	Female, Male	Brazil	B : B	Under 1
26.	1	Male	Brazil	B	Under 1
27.	1	Female	Sri Lanka	B	Under 1
28.	1	Male	Sri Lanka	B	Under 1
29.	2	Female (x2)	Ecuador	A : A	Under 1
30.	1	Male	Romania	B	2 years
31.	3	Female (x3)	Guatemala	A : B : C	Under 1

* Time periods : A = before 1990;
B = 1991 - 1994;
C = 1995 - 1999

D.3: Year of adoption for each child by country group

Year	Sri Lanka	Latin America	China	Europe	Philippines	USA	Total
<1990	8	4					12
1991-1994	4	5		3	1		13
1995-1999	-	5	8	2	1	2	18
Totals	12	14	8	5	2	2	43

D.4: Number and gender of children by country of origin

Country	Female	Male	Totals
Brazil	1	2	3
Bulgaria	-	1	1
Chile	1	-	1
China	8	-	8
Ecuador	2	-	2
El Salvador	1	-	1
Guatemala	5	1	6
Peru	-	1	1
Philippines	2	-	2
Romania	1	3	4
Sri Lanka	7	5	12
USA	1	1	2
Totals	29	14	43

D.5: Summary of children by continent of origin

Continent	F	M	Total
Latin America	10	4	14
Asia	17	5	22
Europe	1	4	5
USA	1	1	2
TOTALS	29	14	43

APPENDIX E: Individual Family Profiles

Family: 01

Marital Status: Single

Region: North East of England

Adopted Children:

Country: China

Gender: Girl

Age at time of adoption: 1- 2 years

Age at time of interview: 1-2 years

Support Group Membership: OASIS – part of Buddying scheme

Present during interview: Mother only

Other details: Only respondent who used internet during adoption process - contact was mainly with families in the USA. Had approached Social Services re domestic adoption ten years prior but was told she would only be considered for an older and probably handicapped child – did not feel able to parent such a child – ICA was not suggested.

Family: 02

Marital Status: Married

Region: North East of England

Adopted Children:

Country: Sri Lanka and China

Gender: 2 Girls

Age at time of adoption: < 1 year and 1-2 years

Age at time of interview: 9 yrs and 2+yrs

Support Group Membership: OASIS and in process of setting up a North East adopters group.

Present during interview: Mother and both daughters present at interview; husband met at birthday party of another family's daughter.

Other details: Wife been married before and has three bio children (boys) from first marriage but now unable to have children. First attempt at adopting from Sri Lanka fell through at the very last minute when the judge in Sri Lanka would not allow them to adopt a boy because the family had three sons of their own and he felt the adopted child would not hold enough status in the new family because of the biological children. They had at this point already spent a month in Sri Lanka but had to come home and start the process all over again.

Mother was herself adopted as a child.

Family: 03

Marital Status: Married

Region: North East of England

Adopted Children:

Country: China

Gender: Girl

Age at time of adoption: 1-2 years

Age at time of interview: 3 yrs

Support Group Membership: OASIS and in process of setting up North East adopters group.

Present during interview: Wife and daughter only at interview - husband and adopted son were met at birthday party.

Other details: Did not seriously consider domestic adoption because, being a social worker, mother was aware of difficulties. However, they have since adopted the son of a bereaved family member.

Family: 04

Marital Status: Single

Region: North East of England

Adopted Children:

Country: China

Gender: Girl

Age at time of adoption: 1-2 years

Age at time of interview: <2 yrs

Support Group Membership: OASIS and North East adopters group

Present during interview: Mother

Other details: Have since met mother and daughter out at local shops. Family now moved to a 'smallish' village; mother was concerned about being accepted but it has been fine.

Family: 05

Marital Status: Married

Region: North East of England

Adopted Children:

Country: China

Gender: Girl

Age at time of adoption: 1-2 years

Age at time of interview: 3yrs

Support Group Membership: OASIS and Children Adopted from China

Present during interview: Mother only present at interview.

Other details: Both parents are lawyers but mother became a full time mother and housewife after adoption. Had visited China before thinking about adopting from there - learnt some Chinese for this visit and have tried to continue using it a little. Active involvement with Chinese community in Newcastle upon Tyne.

Family: 06

Marital Status: Married

Region: North East of England

Adopted Children:

Country: China

Gender: Girl

Age at time of adoption: 1-2 years

Age at time of interview: 3 yrs

Support Group Membership: OASIS and North East adopters group

Present during interview: Mother with daughter being present some of the time.

Other details: Husband worked overseas and travelled extensively. Mother has ill health so daughter attends a private nursery school three full days a week.

Family: 07

Marital Status: Married

Region: North East of England

Adopted Children:

Country: Guatemala

Gender: Girl

Age at time of adoption: < 1 year

Age at time of interview: 11 mths

Support Group Membership: Member of Guatemala Family Group. Contacted OASIS for information.

Present during interview: Mother with baby present. Has four sons, three of whom 'passed through' during interview - no contribution

Other details: Told by OASIS that adopting from China would be extremely difficult because of having their own birth children. Use to live overseas, Mexico and elsewhere, only returning to the UK ten years ago. Attended the Guatemala Family Group Summer party before adopting. Allocated a first child but birth mother changed her mind.

Family: 08

Marital Status: Married

Region: North East of England

Adopted Children:

Country: Bulgaria

Gender: Boy

Age at time of adoption: 1-2 years

Age at time of interview: 4 yrs

Support Group Membership: OASIS and North East Adopters group

Present during interview: Husband and wife present

Other details: Had been trying to start a family for a lot of years and the decision to adopt took 6-7 yrs. Wife worked with children.

Family: 09

Marital Status: Married

Region: North East of England

Adopted Children:

Country: China

Gender: Girl

Age at time of adoption: 1-2 years

Age at time of interview: 3 yrs

Support Group Membership: OASIS, and North East adopters group.

Present during interview: Mother and daughter; stayed for lunch

Other details: Two birth children – girl (20) and boy (24) – both living away at University. Preparing to adopt a second child from China – have a name chosen etc and this is discussed with their adopted daughter who helped to choose a name. Have already returned to China for a holiday and taken their adopted daughter who will be travelling with them when they collect the second little girl. Hope to return every couple of years for a holiday. Wife trained as a teacher but has always been a full time housewife.

Family: 10

Marital Status: Married

Region: London - North East

Adopted Children:

Country: Sri Lanka x2

Gender: Girl and Boy

Age at time of adoption: both < 1 year

Age at time of interview: 10yrs and 9 yrs

Support Group Membership: AFAA, Sri Lankan Support Group

Present during interview: Mother main contributor, father most of the time; daughter was there but did not contribute; son returned from Scouts but did not contribute

Other details: Husband is Indonesian Chinese and came to UK as a child. Have met the family at two AFAA seminars. Returned to Sri Lanka as part of a group.

Family: 11

Marital Status: Single

Region: London - Central

Adopted Children:

Country: El Salvador

Gender: Girl

Age at time of adoption: 6 days

Age at time of interview: 13 yrs

Support Group Membership: El Salvador Group – not very involved these days

Present during interview: Mother and daughter who also contributed

Other details: Single, confident and independent. Mother Italian so feels she has always belonged to two cultures.

Family: 12

Marital Status: Married

Region: London - Central

Adopted Children:

Country: Romania

Gender: Boy

Age at time of adoption: 4 years

Age at time of interview: 13 yrs

Support Group Membership: ARC

Present during interview: Father only - watched son playing football. Met mother as interview ended.

Other details: Jewish family - son at a Jewish school. Given a detailed copy of their experiences of finding the right child. Extensively travelled and very multicultural lifestyle. Speak several languages. Has cultivated several Romanian contacts.

Family: 13

Marital Status: Married

Region: Dorset,

Adopted Children:

Country: Philippines

Gender: Girls x 2

Age at time of adoption: 1-2 years for both children

Age at time of interview: 7 yrs and 4 yrs

Support Group Membership: AFAA - nominal

Present during interview: Husband and wife both present during interview. Daughters were present at first but then went to bed

Other details: Second child is a special needs child receiving treatment at Great Ormond Street Hospital.

Family: 14

Marital Status: Married

Region: Hampshire

Adopted Children:

Country: Sri Lanka

Gender: Boys x 2

Age at time of adoption: 1-2 mths for both children

Age at time of interview: 10 yrs for both children

Support Group Membership: Original responders to questionnaire; know Tee, Dickinson via return visit to Sri Lanka; member of AFAA and Sri Lanka Group but links weakening. Member of International Children

Present during interview: Mother and father both present - stayed for lunch

Other details: Father professor specialising in Latin American studies, mother a lecturer. Mother and her sister both adopted themselves – have contacts with their bio family. Both parents have travelled extensively in Latin America.

Family: 15

Marital Status: Married

Region: North West - Cheshire

Adopted Children:

Country: Guatemala

Gender: Girl and Boy

Age at time of adoption: < 1 year for both children

Age at time of interview: 5 yrs and 2 yrs

Support Group Membership: Guatemala Family Support Group

Present during interview: Mother and father; introduced to children before they went to bed

Other details: Both parents are scientists; mother from New Zealand and father is Welsh. Daughter went with them to collect their son.

Family: 16

Marital Status: Married

Region: North West - Lancashire

Adopted Children:

Country: Sri Lanka

Gender: Girl

Age at time of adoption: < 1 year

Age at time of interview: 10 yrs

Support Group Membership: AFAA.

Present during interview: Mother and father with daughter joining later

Other details: Chose ICA because they are Jehovah Witnesses and they were told this would go against them in this country even though they are both young. Have been back to Sri Lanka twice and have actually met daughter's family – very positive experience

Family: 17

Marital Status: Married

Region: North - Yorkshire

Adopted Children:

Country: Romania

Gender: Girl

Age at time of adoption: +2 years

Age at time of interview: 12 yrs

Support Group Membership: ARC

Present during interview: Mother - father 'passed through'.

Other details: 2 birth children – a boy and a girl; father a vicar. Daughter has learning difficulties – education one of their biggest issues. Romania chosen because of links with the country since 1978 which have continued. Have taken daughter back to visit Romania, age 9yrs. Part of the Rutter's (1999) Romanian adoptees research sample.

Family: 18

Marital Status: Married

Region: London - Central

Adopted Children:

Country: USA

Gender: Boy and girl

Age at time of adoption: 10 days and < 1 mth

Age at time of interview: 4 yrs and 2 yrs

Support Group Membership: Gladney Adopters Parent Group

Present during interview: Mother and father - stayed for evening meal. Both children were in bed

Other details: Both children are white; contact throughout birth mother's pregnancy; two other attempts at adopting were never finalised – one where mother changed her mind about relinquishment and the other where fraud was involved.

Family: 19

Marital Status: Married

Region: London - Central

Adopted Children:

Country: Chile

Gender: Girl

Age at time of adoption: +2 years

Age at time of interview: 8 yrs

Support Group Membership: AFAA - husband now chairperson

Present during interview: Mother and daughter - mother seemed very keen that her daughter be present the whole time

Other details: Extensive delays in adoption process because of problems in Chile - parents were financially supporting child for approx two years and they spent considerable time over there. Have returned to Chile with daughter and have Chilean

foster family member visit them in the UK. Would like to have adopted for a second time but political unrest caused by Pinochet's visit to the UK has caused delays.

Family: 20

Marital Status: Single

Region: London

Adopted Children:

Country: Romania

Gender: Boy

Age at time of adoption: 8 yrs

Age at time of interview: 13 yrs

Support Group Membership: ARC - now editor of newsletter

Present during interview: Mother, son and a friend also adopted from Romania

Other details: Mother a voluntary worker in Romania when she first met son – had no desire for a family or to adopt. Returned several times to see how he was getting along – eventually deciding to adopt. Spoke to son at lunch - he immediately stated he did not want to talk about his birth mother. Mother has done an MA dissertation about Romanian adoptions.

Family: 21

Marital Status: Married

Region: South - Kent

Adopted Children:

Country: Sri Lanka

Gender: Girl and boy

Age at time of adoption: < 1 year

Age at time of interview: 19 yrs and 14 yrs

Support Group Membership: AFAA and Sri Lankan Family Group

Present during interview: Mother and father. Both children join us and talk about their experiences of racism

Other details: Both parents are Irish and lived overseas for extensive periods.

Where they live has a few people from different countries but not many and again the school has some but not many. Mother, in particular seems cautious about idea of return and search – on one hand says searching would not be possible but on the other seems hesitant (unhappy) about idea of children doing this – even goes so far to voice concerns about accidentally meeting birth family and not realising who they were.

Family: 22

Marital Status: Married

Region: Midlands

Adopted Children:

Country: Sri Lanka

Gender: Girls (x2)

Age at time of adoption: <1 year for both children

Age at time of interview: 11 yrs

Support Group Membership: AFAA and Sri Lankan group - active members

Present during interview: Mother, father and both girls - invited for evening meal when birth son joined group.

Other details: Birth son travelled with family to Sri Lanka to collect girls and all the family have since returned to Sri Lanka as part of a group return. Mother writing a leaflet about identity and how to help this process for AFAA to distribute to members.

Family: 23

Marital Status: Married

Region: North East of England

Adopted Children:

Country: Peru

Gender: Boy

Age at time of adoption: 5 mths

Age at time of interview: 7 yrs

Support Group Membership: Peru Family Group

Present during interview: Mother and father - children met on their way to bed

Other details: Had 3 birth daughters AFTER adoption – all in very quick succession. Father a lecturer in mathematics; family are practicing Roman Catholic.

Family: 24

Marital Status: Single

Region: London - Central

Adopted Children:

Country: China

Gender: Girl

Age at time of adoption: 8 mths

Age at time of interview: 6 yrs

Support Group Membership: OASIS; Children Adopted from China

Present during interview: Mother - daughter at school

Other details: Documentary film maker; editor of magazine for Children Adopted from China; done an MA in Chinese Studies; has lots of books around about China and adoption.

Family: 25

Marital Status: Married

Region: London - Central

Adopted Children:

Country: Brazil

Gender: Girl and boy

Age at time of adoption: 7 mths and 3 mths

Age at time of interview: 8 yrs and 7 yrs

Support Group Membership: AFAA and NICA - active members

Present during interview: Both parents - then children for a meal later

Other details: Long-term co-habiting couple who only got married so they could adopt. School – very multicultural – where even ‘white’ families are from overseas.

Family: 26

Marital Status: Married

Region: London – South East

Adopted Children:

Country: Brazil

Gender: Boy

Age at time of adoption: 3 mths

Age at time of interview: 9 yrs

Support Group Membership: AFAA - not active

Present during interview: Father

Other details: Adoption facilitated via friends and friends of friends.

Spent several months in Brazil during adoption process. Feels very let down by the system in the UK – adoption took over 2 ½ yrs to finalise in UK.

Family: 27

Marital Status: Married

Region: London - Hackney

Adopted Children:

Country: Sri Lanka

Gender: Girl

Age at time of adoption: <1 year

Age at time of interview: 9 yrs

Support Group Membership: AFAA - lapsed

Present during interview: Father - wife overseas working, daughter at school

Other details: Father a vicar. Well travelled and lots of overseas links. Area where they live is absolutely multicultural and most of family life involves under-developed countries. Father just done a PhD himself so was supportive and inquisitive about research.

Family: 28

Marital Status: Married

Region: London

Adopted Children:

Country: Sri Lanka

Gender: Boy

Age at time of adoption: 1 mth
Age at time of interview: 9 yrs

Support Group Membership: Sri Lankan Support Group
Present during interview: Husband and wife – walked round to get son from school and stayed a little while to chat to him
Other details: Father a lecturer; given a written account of their experiences in Sri Lanka about all the problems they had with lawyers. Have returned to Sri Lanka with son.

Family: 29

Marital Status: Married

Region: London

Adopted Children:

Country: Ecuador

Gender: Girls (x2)

Age at time of adoption: 1 yr and 3 mths

Age at time of interview: 12 yrs

Support Group Membership: AFAA

Present during interview: Mother, father and both daughters

Other details: Have made a return trip to Ecuador - shown photos and souvenirs of visit. Live in predominantly white part of London. Only about nine months difference in ages of girls who were adopted at the same time - often asked if they are twins and do not like it.

Family: 30

Marital Status: Single

Region: London

Adopted Children:

Country: Romania

Gender: Boy

Age at time of adoption: 2 yrs

Age at time of interview: 11 yrs

Support Group Membership: ARC

Present during interview: Mother - son arrived as interviewer leaving

Other details: Met son during interview with family 20. Mother self-employed working from home. Was a volunteer in Romania when she saw her son and fell in love with him and decided to adopt - prior to this had never considered having children. Has been interviewed in the past for newspaper articles.

Family: 31

Marital Status: Single

Region: London – South East

Adopted Children:

Country: Guatemala (x3)

Gender: Three girls

Age at time of adoption: <1 year; 1-2 years; +2 years

Age at time of interview: 8 yrs; 6 yrs; and 4 yrs

Support Group Membership: Guatemala Support Group co-ordinator; writes newsletter

Present during interview: Mother, three daughters and grand-daughter present during interview

Other details: Has three bio children. Very active supporter of ICA and would have adopted more children if allowed. Most of life seems to revolve around involvement with Guatemala and adoption – has been on the TV, had many articles written about her and has been the subject of racial harassment.

APPENDIX F: Ratification of the 1993 Hague Convention

Dates of ratification of the Hague Convention by the countries included in this research in alphabetical order - not order of ratifying:

Country	Year of Ratification
Brazil	March 1999
Bulgaria	May 2002
Chile	July 1999
Ecuador	September 1995
El Salvador	November 1998
Guatemala*	July 2003
Peru	September 1995
Philippines	July 1996
Romania	December 1994
Sri Lanka	January 1995

* Letters of objection have been written

Both China, in November 2000, and the USA, in March 1994, signed but have not yet ratified. The signing of the Convention signals a countries intention to proceed with efforts to ratify. Since signing in 1994 the USA has passed The Intercountry Adoption Act 2000 and preparations for implementation are in place. However, regulations needed to allow full implementation have not been completed and are not expected until some time during 2004.

Guatemala was not one of the original signatories but has since acceded to the Convention in November 2002 and should be operational in July 2003 unless there are objections from other members before this date.

The Guatemalan authorities have suspended all overseas adoptions until they have in place the necessary procedures to meet the obligations required under The Hague Convention - how long this will last unknown.

APPENDIX G: Intercountry Adoption Standards

BAAF and NICA were commissioned by the Department of Health to draft new ICA Standards. A first draft was submitted to the DoH, was amended and a second draft was circulated to other bodies such as ADSS. In May 2003 NICA contacted the DoH to ask about the delay and was told that a decision was awaited from Margaret Hodge (Morgan 2003).

Copy of email from Cathy Morgan to Peter Selman about whether there is a need for further standards for intercountry adoption,

From: Cathy.Morgan@doh.gsi.gov.uk [Cathy.Morgan@doh.gsi.gov.uk] Sent: 01 September 2003 15:46
To: P F Selman

You asked about the Intercountry Adoption Standards. As you know, we have concentrated most recently on putting in place the Regulations and guidance for the new intercountry adoption arrangements (including the ratification of the Hague Convention). In addition, from 30 April 2003 National Minimum Standards which apply to all adoption services, including intercountry adoption, have come into force. In the light of these changes we are now reviewing the extent to which any further information and standards on the provision of intercountry adoption services is needed.

We intend to seek guidance from Margaret Hodge on how she wishes future work to be taken forward on intercountry adoption, both in terms of how she wants the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to be implemented in full and how she would like to handle existing work programmes and commitments (including standards). As soon as we have received a steer from her on this we will let you know.